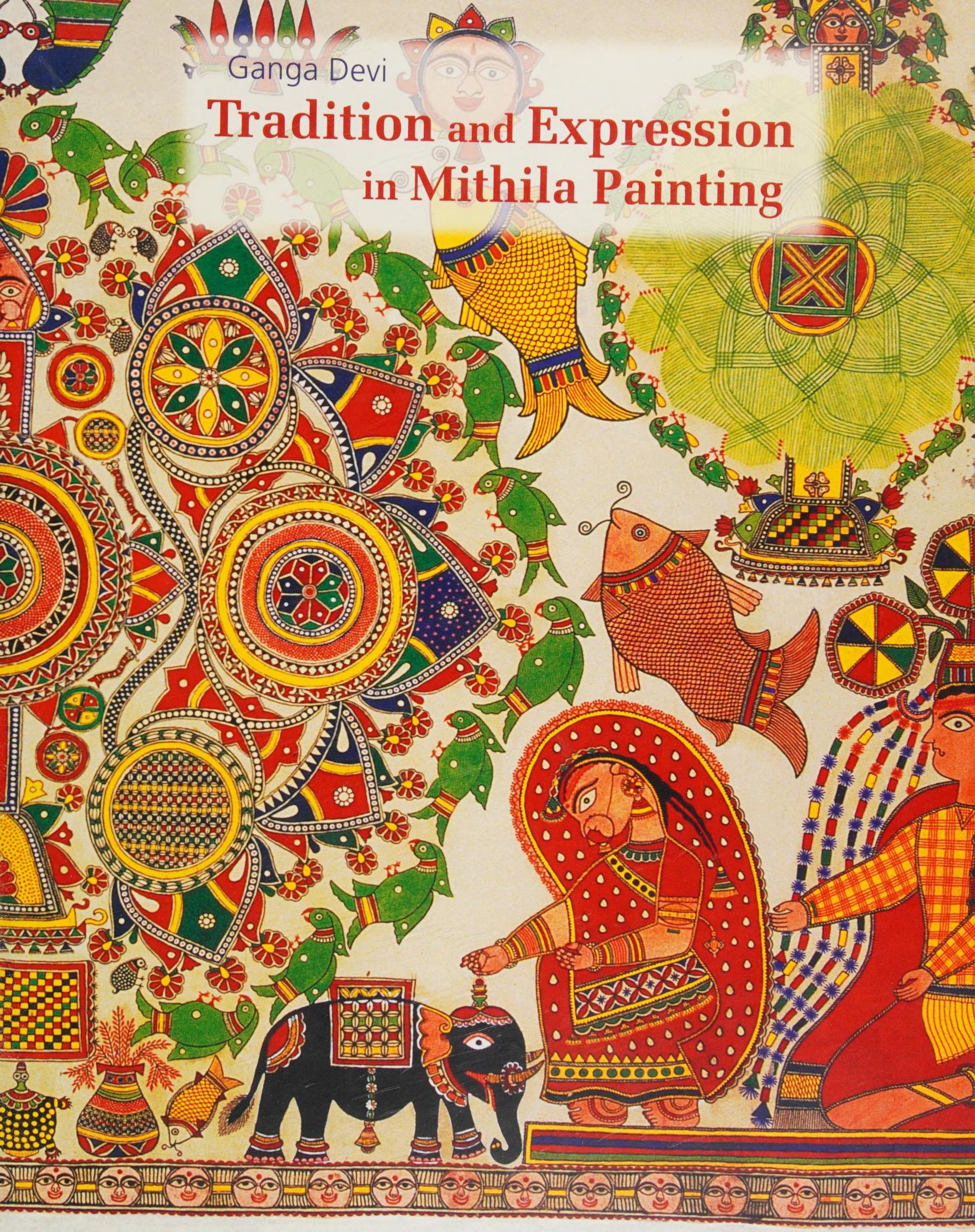
Ganga Devi

Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting



JYOTINDRA JAIN

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Ganga Devi

Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting

In the Mithila region of north Bihar there is an old tradition of painting the walls of the nuptial chamber. The paintings are an assemblage of symbolic images of the lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds and snakes in union, and represent fertility and the proliferation of life. According to conventional ritual practice, the bride and the groom spend three nights in this chamber without cohabiting, and on the fourth, amidst the paintings, consummate the marriage.

Ganga Devi, both as a person and as an artist, was rooted in the tradition of Mithila painting. While the tradition was deeply ingrained in her and was a source of inspiration in her work, and of courage in her tormented personal life, she was one of the few Mithila artists to respond spontaneously and sensitively to the new possibilities offered by the availability of paper in the region.

The creative expression of rural and tribal artists has always been seen by most art historians as a product of ethnic collectivity whose authenticity lies in the remoteness of time and space. This study is the first of its kind, tracing the growth of a rural artist's work from her early paintings to her venturing out into narrative and autobiographical work, and the invention of a new pictorial vocabulary.

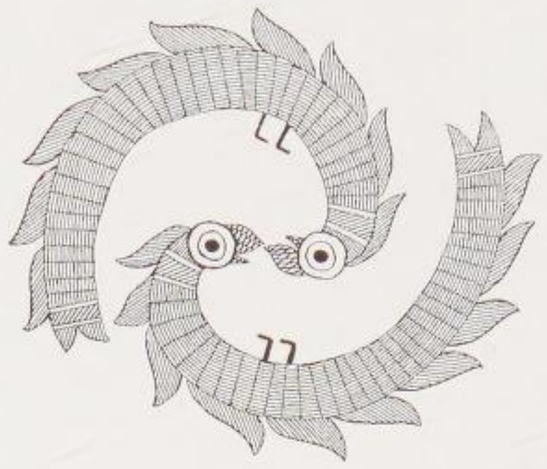
With 78 colour and 31b&w illustrations.

Jacket illustration:
Sacred imagery to be depicted on the central wall of an ideal Kayasth *kohbar-ghar;* painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989. (see p. 37)

Brian A. Hatcher

Ganga Devi

Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting



Ganga Devi

Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting

JYOTINDRA JAIN

Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., Ahmedabad, India
in association with
The Mithila Museum, Niigata, Japan

First published in the United States of America
in 1997 by
Grantha Corporation
80 Cliffedgeway, Middletown, NJ 07701

in association with
Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.
Chidambaram, Ahmedabad 380013 India
and
The Mithila Museum
Niigita, Japan

Distributed in North America by
Antique Collectors' Club
Market Street, Industrial Park
Wappingers' Falls, NY 12590
Tel: 800-252-5231
Fax: 914-297-0068

Distributed in the United Kingdom
& Europe by
Antique Collectors' Club
5 Church Street, Woodbridge
Suffolk IP12 1DS
Tel: 1394 385-501
Fax: 1394 384-434

Text and photographs
© Jyotindra Jain
except noted otherwise

All rights reserved under international copyright conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

ISBN: 0-944142-33-8
ISBN: 8-185822-46-8
LC: 96-78244

Edited by Ravi Dayal
Designed by Jatin Banker / Mapin Design Studio
Colour Separations by Reproscan
Printed in Singapore

The corporations concerned with
the preservation of India's heritage,
who have made this book possible are:

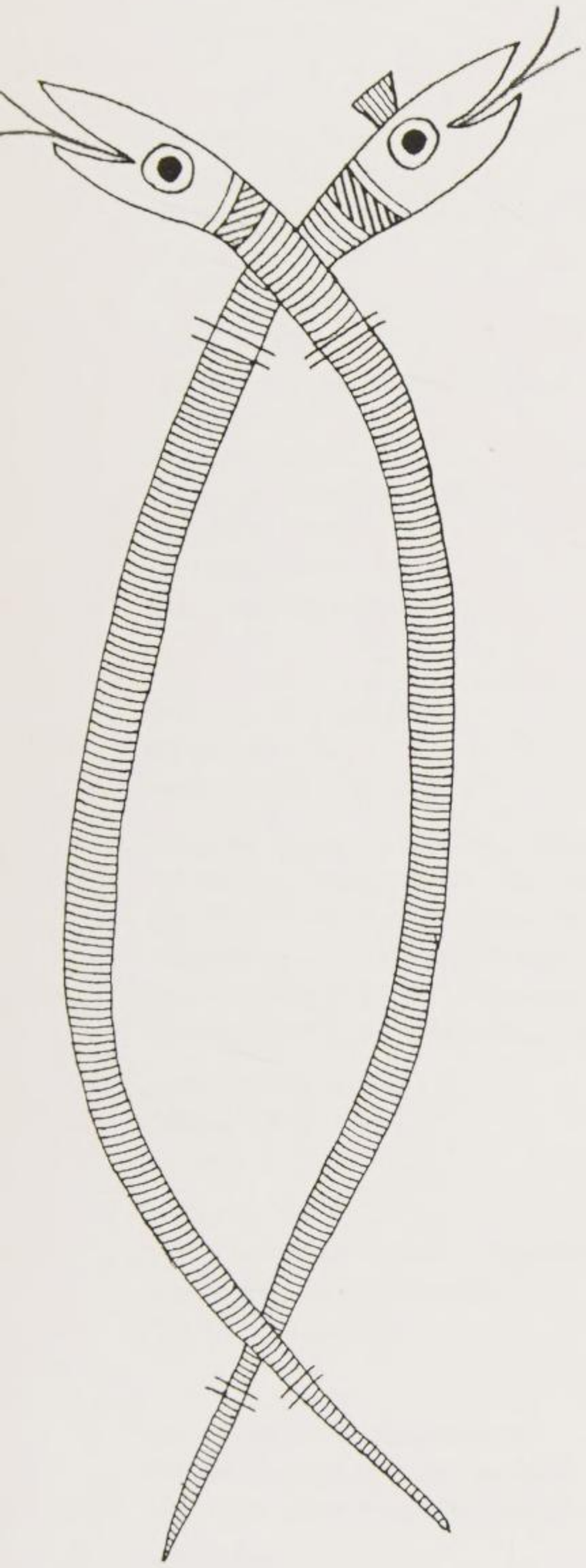
Air India
Reliance Industries
(Textile Division)
Tiger Tops Mountain Travel, India and Nepal
Rajshree Group of Companies, Coimbatore

This book has been partially sponsored by:
The Mithila Museum
Tsurumoto Room Co. Ltd.
JAL Foundation

Frontispiece
Ganga Devi, working on a painting at
The Mithila Museum, Niigata, Japan, 1990;
Photo: Mithila Museum, Japan.

For

Saskya Iris, Rumit Julian and Jutta



Acknowledgements

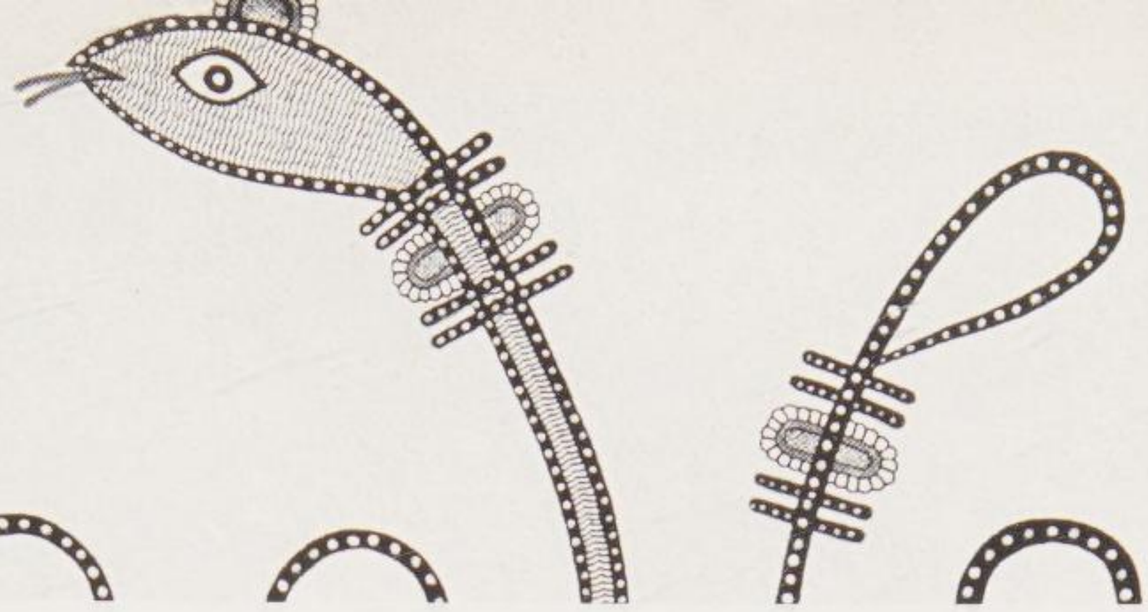
My deepest gratitude is to Ganga Devi. The several interviews and conversations I had with her from 1986 to her death in 1991 are the basis of this book.

This book owes its existence also to the help received from friends, colleagues, and institutions. I mention their names in affection and gratitude:

Pupul Jayakar; Gulam Mohammad Sheikh; Manu Parekh; A. Ramachandran, Rupika Chawla; O.P. Jain; Jyotsna Milan; Renu Mathur; B.M. Pande; Hari Prasad Misra; O.P. Rai; Ravindra Lal Karna; Shanti Devi; Mahasundari Devi; Godavari Dutt; Tokio Hasegawa; Shozo Tsurumoto; Yasuhiko Nagano; Yves Vequaud; Jean-Hubert Martin; Elizabeth Moynihan; Maureen Liebl; John Cort; Vishakha Desai; David Faivus; Mary Lanius and the Denver Museum of Art; Crafts Museum, New Delhi; Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi; Ethnic Arts Foundation, New York.

The manuscript was read, criticised and edited by Ravi Dayal and Adil Tayabji.

The chapters gathered in this book were written between 1988 and 1996. During these years I have received help in thinking through them by Jutta Jain-Neubauer and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. I trust they know of my continuing gratitude. I am equally thankful to Rumit Julian and Saskya Iris for computerisation of the manuscript.



Contents

Preface

The Life of Ganga Devi **11**
'There is No Balance in Your Account'
The Cancer Years

Traditions of Painting in Mithila **23**
Kohbar
Painted Wrappers for Vermilion Powder
Painting on Paper
The *kohbar-ghar* and the Wedding Rites of Mithila
Wall-Paintings of the *kohbar-ghar*
The Painters and the Process of Painting
The Iconographic Motifs and their Pictorial Conceptualisation

The Stories of Rama **69**
Transition From the Symbolic to the Narrative
Illustrating the Story of Rama

The Cycle of Life **95**

Ride in a Roller Coaster **113**
The Autobiographical Works
The America Series
Pilgrimage to Badrinath
The Cancer Series
The Japan Series

Notes **131**

Bibliography **135**

गंगादेवी
ग्राम पोस्टरसीदपुर

Preface

> '... how far we are really going to penetrate into the intentional fabric of painters living in cultures or periods remote from our own.'
>
> 'Cultures do not impose uniform cognitive and reflective equipment on individuals.'
>
> 'One aspect of Piero della Francesca's way of painting represents both a culture making a skill available and an individual electing to take it up.'
>
> – Michael Baxandall [1]

In the Mithila region of north Bihar there is an old tradition of painting the walls of the *kohbar-ghar*, the nuptial chamber. The paintings are an assemblage of symbolic images of the lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds, and snakes in union, and represent fertility and the proliferation of life. According to conventional ritual practice, the bride and the groom spend three nights in this chamber without cohabiting, and on the fourth, amidst the paintings, consummate the marriage. Tradition demanded that these paintings be done collectively by the women of the bride's family and those of the village and caste, but only on the occasion of a wedding. This tradition continued until the early 1960s, till drawing paper was available easily and cheaply in the villages of Mithila.

With the availability of paper, the women painters of the area, for the first time, experienced freedom from the constraints inherent in the making of ritual-bound, static, magical images in the fixed medium of wall-painting. They could now paint whatever they liked, on any scale. This led to a great flowering of creativity and brought to light several innovative artists who departed from the inherited and repetitive tradition in favour of more experimental works and who introduced contemporary images from everyday life. Images of aeroplanes, locomotives, railway trains, motor cars, buses and even roller-coasters began to replace the conventional symbolic motifs. Some artists felt inspired to narrate mythological stories and personal experiences of journeys and pilgrimages. As a result, a new conceptualisation of images and unprecedented narrative pictorial devices came to the fore, leading to drastic changes in the formal structure of the painting itself. From this great vicissitude, several individual painters emerged whose work showed signs of 'a radical departure within the context of their own tradition'. Ganga Devi, whose life, the tradition from which she came and her work are the basis of this book, was one such artist.

Ganga Devi, both as a person and an artist, was rooted in the tradition of Mithila painting. Whereas tradition acted as a constraint on several other Mithila painters who mass-produced self-imitating and lifeless copies of conventional painting, Ganga Devi was too much of an individual to be similarly fettered. While she was deeply rooted in the tradition, which was a source of inspiration in her work and of courage in her tormented personal life, she was one of the few Mithila artists to respond spontaneously and vigorously to the possibilities offered by the availability of paper in the region.

Opposite page
Sita collecting flowers, Ganga Devi, late 1970s; ink on paper; 28 cm x 38 cm; collection: Hari Prasad Misra, Bhubaneshwar.

With the availability of paper, Ganga Devi no longer confined herself to

painting the ritual *kohbar-ghar* and *aripan*, with their limited vocabulary of symbols and images, but started to investigate the unlimited potentiality offered by line drawing. One outcome of this was the series of works based on mythological subjects. A great devotee of Rama, Ganga Devi, in the new phase of her work, attempted a conceptualisation of the story of Rama. This being her first experience of handling narration, she was faced with the problems of perspective, of converting the temporal sequence of the narrative into a spatial situation, and of translating mythical images into pictorial ones. Chapter III, 'The stories of Rama' deals with this phase of her work.

Ganga Devi's next significant phase is her epic work entitled *The Cycle of Life*. The theme she chose to paint comprises a series of *samskaras* or ritual events of initiation as practised by the Kayasths of Mithila. For the first time she painted a theme related to her surroundings. The results are stunningly fresh and original. The painting, replete with rich cultural detail and religious beliefs and practices, was conceived as one large continuous narrative. The visual effect is that of a universe teeming with dozens of men and women, birds, trees, and animals, all a part of a great celebration of life.

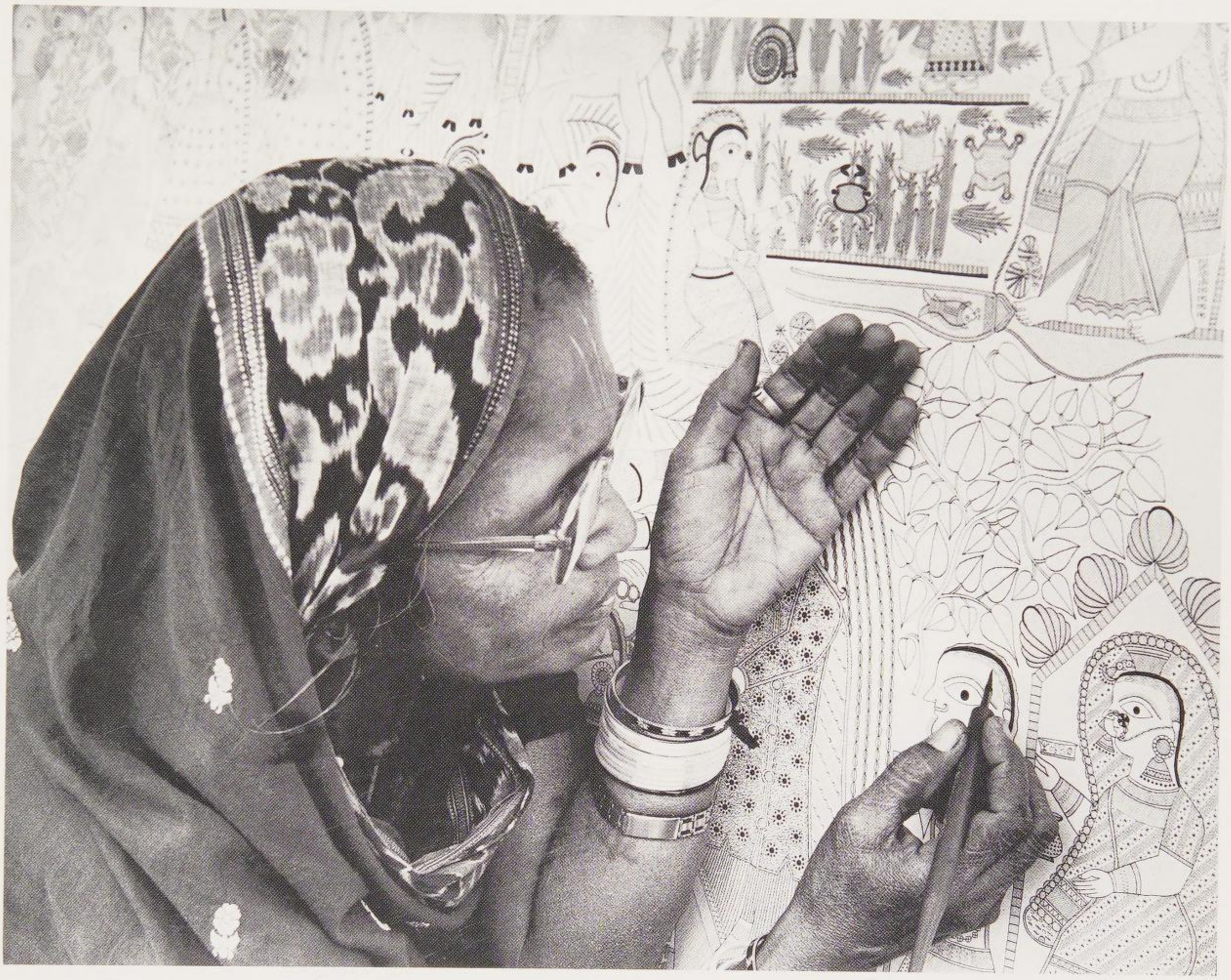
It is rare to find an Indian folk artist deviating from the inherited collective cultural tradition to express personal experiences and perceptions derived from the contemporary urban world around her. Ganga Devi's position as a pre-eminent traditional Mithila painter brought her opportunities to travel to the former Soviet Union, the United States, and Japan. She did not see this 'completely different world' as a mute observer but each time on returning home did a series of paintings based on her exposure to it. *Moscow Hotel*, *Festival of American Folk Life* and *Ride in a Roller Coaster* are examples of how an Indian village artist attempts to mythologise the great contemporary urban symbols of our time. In these paintings Ganga Devi transforms the ordinary commonplace images of hotel facades, motor cars, national flags, ticket-booths, roller-coasters, and people carrying shopping bags into imaginary and 'fantastic' objects.

Before her death from cancer in 1991, Ganga Devi completed a series of four paintings. These are autobiographical works and relate to her illness. In them, Ganga Devi the artist looks from a distance at Ganga Devi the unfortunate first wife of Sukhdev Laldas, and at the tragedy of her last days. For weeks together, a patient in the cancer ward of a Delhi hospital, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling fan and at the electric bulb, and they play an important part in these last works of hers.

It is customary for art-historians to trace the evolution of the work of individual artists who belong to mainstream modern art. On the other hand, the creative expression of rural and tribal artists has always been seen by most of them as a product of ethnic collectivity whose authenticity lies in the remoteness of time and space. Given this context, it needs to be emphasised that this study is the first of its kind, tracing the growth of a rural artist's work from the early paintings done as learning exercises until the time she ventured out into narrative and autobiographical work, and inventing, whenever required, a new pictorial vocabulary.

The Life of Ganga Devi

'There is No Balance in Your Account'



Ganga Devi was born around 1928 in the village of Chatara in Madhubani district, Bihar. Her father, Guruprasad Laldas was a well-to-do *zamindar*, a land owner who owned property in Bihar and Nepal. Ganga Devi had five brothers and a sister. She studied up to Class III in a primary school opened by a woman called Khakhiadevi, who had been widowed as a child. Ganga Devi's mother was renowned in the village for her elaborate *kohbar* paintings, and Ganga Devi imbibed this skill from her. She recollects:

> I got married when I was fifteen-and-a-half years old. I had never seen the bridegroom before my marriage. My father arranged the marriage. I was engaged for six months. To start with, the marriage worked smoothly. After eight to ten years, I gave birth to a girl. The child died immediately after birth. Soon after that, my husband's younger brothers got married and their wives came to the house.

Recalling the early years of her marriage, Ganga Devi pondered over the fact that, in contrast to the affluence and cultured atmosphere of her father's home, her husband's family was not only poor but also lacked any interest in art and culture. 'Women in that locality could not paint anything', she recalls sorrowfully. After her husband's three younger brothers were married they all had children, but Ganga Devi did not bear another child after her daughter's death. That, and her alleged lack of good looks, motivated one of her sisters-in-law to instigate her husband to remarry. According to Ganga Devi, her husband was not in favour of marrying again, but her sister-in-law 'made black magic on him, his heart turned away from me, and he began to have different feelings towards me'. This was after ten years of marriage. Around that time Ganga Devi's mother fell ill and her brother came to take her to their home. In her absence, two of her sisters-in-law got Ganga Devi's husband engaged to a young girl. Ganga Devi vividly recollects:

> I was told that when the father of my co-wife came to my husband's house to negotiate his daughter's marriage, he expressed some apprehension about his daughter surviving in an atmosphere of poverty. My sister-in-law from Satghara village reassured him that Ganga Devi has some land and she is trained in spinning and *sikki*-grass basketry. 'We will manage.' My co-wife's father said, 'Ganga Devi is highly skilled whereas my daughter is incompetent'. My sister-in-law reconfirmed that Ganga Devi has jewellery and cash. 'Once your daughter marries, we shall take all this and throw her out. Your daughter will not have a co-wife'. My co-wife's father was convinced. The engagement took place and a date for the marriage was fixed. One of my well-wishers wrote a letter to me informing me of my husband's engagement and marriage. On receipt of this news I wept bitterly. My mother tried to console me. I said: 'I will have to attend my husband's marriage.' My mother attempted to prevent me, but I insisted on going. A bullock cart and an escort were arranged, and I left for Rasidpur. When my in-laws saw me, they lost heart, but I said: 'I have not come here to stop the marriage, there is no need to stop it.' The wedding took place and my husband's new wife came to live with us.

The pain of being a childless woman and a witness to her husband's second marriage on the ground that she was 'not good-looking' had still not broken Ganga Devi. Her fate had not been by any means extraordinary by the social norms prevalent in Mithila, and the poise and composure of Ganga Devi's response to it all was remarkable. But then incidents occurred that entirely changed the course of her life. She was insulted, humiliated and robbed by her husband and his new wife. Driven to despair, had she not been a

Previous page
Ganga Devi working on *The Cycle of Life*; New Delhi, 1984.

Opposite page
Top
Ganga Devi's house, Rasidpur, Madhubani; 1986-87.
Photo: David Faivus

Bottom
Ganga Devi, at home in Rasidpur, Madhubani. Her tin trunk kept on the table and rolls of painting carefully wrapped and hung from the ceiling may be noted; 1986-87.
Photo: David Faivus

woman of some inner strength, she would have totally lost heart. Ganga Devi did not break down. She turned inwards, took stock of her situation, and saw herself as an outsider. Remarking on this event on one occasion, she said: '*Hamara ankh band ho gaya, sara dunia band ho gaya, charon disa me andhera, andhera chha gaya, hamko laga jaise ham patal mein pahunch gaya hai*'. (My eyes got shut, the world was shut off, there was darkness all around, I felt as if I had arrived in hell.)

This incident was a turning point in her life, and is worth describing in detail.

It is customary among the Kayasths of Mithila, for a woman, at the time of her marriage, to bring along a tin trunk holding her belongings from her father's to her husband's home, no one is expected to open it without her permission. One afternoon her husband and his second wife came to Ganga Devi's room and ordered her to open her trunk. Ganga Devi recalled the moment graphically:

> My husband and his new wife entered my room and ordered me to get up from near the trunk and sit elsewhere. It was like a dacoity. They opened my trunk. There was nothing much in it. There were two rupees for buying paper and pigments for painting a *kohbar* for my brother's son's wedding. My co-wife took away the money. I cried, I prayed, I requested her not to take the money kept for this particular *kohbar*, but she did not listen.
>
> There was a small piece of silver jewellery – that too she snatched. After initial resistance, I gave up. She also took away my sari, my blouse, soap, two bottles of hair-oil, bed-sheets. I began to weep and shout loudly: 'They have taken away everything, nothing is left; my mother gave me clothes, bed-sheets; I have no money left to paint the *kohbar* for my brother.' There was a commotion in the entire locality.
>
> My co-wife took all these things and went to my sisters-in-law from Balat and Satghara and said: 'I have taken everything from the "one from Chatara [i.e. Ganga Devi]". Now there is nothing in her trunk.'
>
> In this trunk I also had some rice grains for my daily worship of Mahadev. My co-wife attempted to take the rice too but my husband prevented her from doing so by saying: 'Do not take the rice, it is for Mahadev's worship. If you eat it, you will be reduced to nothingness.' She left the rice untouched.
>
> I was very unhappy. I thought, I will not survive. I closed my eyes. There was darkness all around me. When I woke up, I felt peaceful. A thought came to my mind: 'I can paint, I can construct figures of *sikki* grass.' I went to Shakti Devi, my childhood friend who too was from my father's village and was a renowned painter. I told her: 'You are like my mother, like my sister, give me some work. I am lost in life, put me back on the track, I will work and earn my livelihood.' Shakti Devi gave me some paper and I started painting. Shakti Devi, herself a painter, used to pay me one rupee, three rupees, or five rupees for my paintings. I never earned a hundred rupees from her. Along with her own work, Shakti Devi supplied buyers with paintings bought from other artists. She sold them in Delhi and Patna, and retained the whole amount for herself. One day I went to Shakti Devi and requested her to lend me 50 paise to buy some soap in order to wash my dirty clothes. She refused to lend the money with the words: 'There is no balance in your account.' I said, 'Lend me 50 paise now and deduct it from my future

> account', but she refused. I then went to the house of my sister's son and borrowed a rupee from him. With this I bought soap and caustic soda, and washed my clothes.

Ganga Devi spoke warmly of the help and support she had received from Shakti Devi at a time when she faced a crisis in her life, but found it difficult to understand her behaviour in marketing her paintings under her own name and utterly exploiting Ganga Devi.

Some time after her tin trunk had been ransacked, Ganga Devi contemplated committing ritual suicide. She had gone to Simaria, a sacred place on the banks of the Ganges in Bihar, and there she undertook the vow of *mas-upas* (a month's fasting), with a view to sacrificing her life at a holy site.[1] This was perhaps the only time when her belief in her inner endurance was shaken. Otherwise, each of these harrowing and unique experiences sharpened Ganga Devi's perception, provided her with a profound understanding of the human world and its manifestations and, above all, taught her to retreat periodically into the world of her pictorial imagination expressed through powerful lines and a fine sense of the organisation of space. Her chaotic life and the ordered and harmonious world of her painting were organically related. In her personal life there was an all round invasion and encroachment but, as if to balance this, in her painting each character and each image was provided with its own breathing space. Her inner turmoil led her to create a world of harmony and beauty in her work.

Ganga Devi's rise to fame began around 1973 when the 'Madhubani Office'[2] came into existence. Monetary grants were given to painters by the Government, and she was one of the recipients. It was around this time that she came to be recognised as the real painter behind the 'sudden emergence of a new style' in Shakti Devi's paintings. Ganga Devi reminisces:

> When the Madhubani Office came into existence, funds were released from the Patna Office. Each artist was given Rs 1,500. In Rasidpur *basti*, I was one of the recipients. The maximum amount was given in Jitwarpur. In Ranti village about five to seven artists received such grants. All of us painted with material bought from the grant. The paintings were sent to Patna. Bihko Fransi[3] who used to buy paintings from Shakti Devi saw some of my paintings with her and asked her about the identity of the artist. Shakti Devi said: 'It is by one of my relatives', but did not give my name. From the Rs 1,500 that I had received, I bought paper and inks and made a painting. This painting was sent to Patna. Bihko Fransi saw it there and on enquiries found out that it was my work. He learnt that I lived in Madhubani and thus came to the Madhubani Office in search of me. In those days I often did not sign my works because Shakti Devi did not allow me to sign. Shakti Devi was also from Chatara *basti*, and we had been together from childhood; even our marriages had taken place on the same night. But she would say: 'If you write your name, your painting will not be sold'. Bihko Fransi was from Paris. He used to buy a number of paintings.
>
> Misra Sahib[4] of the Madhubani Office arranged for a car to bring Bihko Fransi to come to Rasidpur. Satnarayan Lal of Jitwarpur came along. When he reached our *basti* he asked: 'Where is Ganga Devi's house?' Some people showed him the house. I saw the car and said to myself: 'Where is the car from? Those who come looking for Sukhdev Laldas come on a bicycle.' From the car alighted Bihko, a white man. I wondered: 'Where does this white man come from?' I was watching

> the scene through slits in the thatched wall. He asked: 'Is there anyone called Ganga Devi here?' A voice said: 'Yes, she is here.'

At that moment, giving up all sense of modesty, I came out and said: 'Yes, I am Ganga Devi'. He enquired about my work. I showed him three or four of my paintings and told him that I was working on another one. He asked me: 'Where do you sell?' I said: 'I give my paintings to the Madhubani Office, to Misra Sahib, and he sends them to Patna.' Bihko gave me a sheet of paper and asked me to paint on it and send the painting to him. As arranged, I sent the painting to Bihko, and he bought it. He gave me three more sheets of paper. I painted on these. He bought them. He went on supplying paper and I went on painting. Once he gave me a paper roll of 5 x 7 feet. I painted on this. He took this painting to Delhi. He also made a film on me. This was seen by Pupul Jayakar[5] and Indira Gandhi'.[6]

In 1987 or thereabout Yves Vequaud, popularly known as Bihko Fransi in the villages of Madhubani, happened to visit India, giving me an opportunity to cross-check a few points about the painting scene in Mithila in the early 1970s, and his version of the discovery of Ganga Devi. The essence of my conversation with Yves Vequaud is as follows: He first came to India some time in 1970. Exposure to a Mithila painting in Delhi lured him to Mithila. He was rather disappointed with the city of Madhubani, which he found dirty, and he was irritated by the children who constantly surrounded him wherever he went. A college student from Ranti volunteered to conduct him around the villages, and also took him to Ranti where he met Shakti Devi. According to Yves Vequaud, Shakti Devi's reputation was based on the support she received from Upendra Maharathi, the renowned collector of the folk arts of Bihar. Yves Vequaud gave Shakti Devi a sheet of paper to paint on, and he was not very impressed by her work. Thereafter he spent almost a year travelling in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and elsewhere and then returned to Mithila to spend about a fortnight. During this period he also happened to meet Sita Devi, another renowned artist of Mithila. In March 1973 Yves Vequaud returned once more to Mithila with his friend Edouard Boubat, who was responsible for the photography for Vequaud's book. From November 1973 to February 1974 Boubat, Vequaud, and his five-man team shot a film on the women painters of Mithila. One day Shakti Devi brought a few paintings to sell to Yves Vequaud and his team. One drawing was 'really beautiful', its figures had elongated noses. 'I suspected a story and therefore I asked her whether she was the artist of that drawing', said Yves Vequaud. 'Shakti Devi replied in the affirmative. I noticed that at the back there was a signature which had been scratched out with a red pen. The next day I went to her and said that I was convinced that it was somebody else's work. Shakti Devi confessed that it was Ganga Devi's work.

Eventually, Satnarayan Lal, the son of Jagadamba Das, took Vequaud to Ganga Devi's house. He provided her with paper and she painted for him. During 1973-74 Vequaud visited Ganga Devi four or five times, presenting her with a white pullover and blanket. When Yves Vequaud came to Ganga Devi's house, she washed his feet. His sound recordist, George Luneau, met Pupul Jayakar when he visited Delhi in early 1974 and apparently told her about Ganga Devi. Some time in 1975, Vequaud met Indira Gandhi and acquainted her with Ganga Devi's work.

Ganga Devi, during the days of chemotherapy, New Delhi.

Reflecting once more on the past, Ganga Devi continued:

> Around this time a thought was given to consider me for a National Award. Misra Sahib of the Madhubani Office obtained a large sheet of paper and asked me to paint on it. I told him that I had no place to sit and paint. There was no peace at home. Misraji invited me to stay in his house and paint there. On this, my husband's brother said: 'You have got our nose and ears chopped', ('down-graded the family's honour by staying in another man's house'). My husband said: 'I will tear the paper to pieces.' They said they would not allow me to go to Madhubani and live with Misra Sahib's family. Badridas, my sister's relative, intervened and I just left for Madhubani. Misra Sahib and his wife were very kind to me. He said I must complete the painting, otherwise Jayakarji would be disappointed. I painted day and night. My husband knew this much, that I was not a woman of bad character. My co-wife was also quiet after she learnt that I had a grant of Rs 1,500.
>
> I completed the painting which was shown at a twenty-two day exhibition held in Baba Kharak Singh Marg in New Delhi. Pupul Jayakarji also came there. I told her: 'My painting did not turn out to be very good because my husband married a second time and I was heartbroken. With a troubled heart and shaken state of mind I could not do better'.
>
> I was selected for the National Award. As soon as I came to know about the award, I went to Shakti Devi to touch her feet in gratitude. Shakti Devi did not

look at me and went away in anger. She stopped talking to me. Once I met her in Patna. She asked me: 'When will I get the National Award?' I once told Jayakarji: 'Shakti Devi is a good artist, she has been painting even before me.' Jayakarji said: 'She will get it if she deserves it.' [Shakti Devi subsequently received a National Award.]

Rajen Sondhi had once asked me to do a painting on manav jivan, *The Cycle of Life* for an exhibition in London. He took me there, but asked me to do a wall painting and not manav jivan. I asked: 'To whom is the painting to be given; where will it be painted? He said: 'You stay in my house, complete the painting; my mother will give you food, etc., and we will get you to Bihar. But then you leave the painting in my house.' I did not know him at all then. I said: 'My person is the Chairman'.[7] I asked Mrs Jayakar what to do. She said: 'Make it and give it to Gram Jhanki.[8] Go home, make it there, not here.'

Because of the National Award, many foreigners had begun to come to my house. The Japanese came regularly. A Japanese gentleman wanted to buy *The Cycle of Life*. I said: 'No, it was for Gram Jhanki'. He spoke to Misra Sahib and tried to lure me with much money. I refused. My bastiwallas insisted and argued: 'You will go away to Darbhanga, yours is a thatched house; when it rains it will collapse, what will happen to your painting? You will not get anything out of it.' I still refused, but finally under pressure from the bastiwallas I sold it for Rs 10,000.

Later I was commissioned to do another painting on the same theme by the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts.[9] (Ganga Devi worked on this painting at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi). One day I was told that it was in the newspapers that I had been awarded the Padmashri.[10] When I heard this, I cried the whole night.

When I went back to Rasidpur, I did not meet my husband nor did he talk to me. I thought 'I will not meet my husband. When Sitaji was born, it was to kill Ravana. How much Rama appreciated Sita! He killed Ravana and brought Sita home, but then he banished her to the forest. After that she did not meet Rama. Now Rama is my husband, I cannot meet my mortal husband. Rama gave me so much. I had no clothes to wear, no blankets to cover myself. When I came to receive the National Award, I was not given clothing – anything – from my husband's house. It was the Patna Office[11] which gave me a blanket, a floor-spread, a bed-sheet, a shawl, bedding, soap, a soapdish, spectacles, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a sari, a blouse. I have preserved those clothes till today. I will never discard them. They are white. They are a memory of my painful days.

Once I told my husband: 'We should keep contact otherwise the *bastiwallas* will think badly of you.' But he said: "I married a second time because I did not like you, I will not let you live here.' His younger brother kept me in his house; I worked there. But everyone in the *basti* advised me not to work so hard. They said I should go to Chatara and live there comfortably with my brothers. I said: 'Even if I have to beg, I will live here. By living here I suffer pain, but only in pain will God appear to me. In my brothers' house there is wealth and comfort. In comfort I will forget God. I will stay here.

Once an American asked me about the great turn that my life had taken. I told him: 'Everyday I go to a pond and bathe there. Near the pond there is a shrine of Mahadev. Nearby is a mango grove. Once I went there and called out: 'Where is Gauri-Shankar? Appear to me.' That time, when I contemplated on Gauri-Shankar, Rama-Janaki, they heard me. I have been living on that till today.

The Cancer Years

During the afternoon of 14 September 1987, I was told that Ganga Devi was waiting outside my office at the Crafts Museum to meet me. I was surprised to find her there and wondered at her sudden and unscheduled arrival. I found her squatting on the floor with her bent head, resting on her folded arms. I could guess that something was amiss. I called out: 'Ganga Deviji, how are you here?' She raised her head. She was crying, but stood up and handed me a note from a hospital and said: 'I am suffering from a very bad disease.' The note indicated suspected breast cancer in an advanced stage. Further treatment was recommended at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi.

To the Museum staff she was like a member of the family. They knew her because of the two years (1983-5) she had spent at the Museum, working on her large painting *The Cycle of Life*. Everyone was grieved to hear of her illness. We informed Mrs. Pupul Jayakar about it and, through her intervention, managed to get her examined at the AIIMS, where she subsequently underwent treatment for cancer for over a year.

By the time Ganga Devi came to Delhi, the disease had not only infected the breast but had spread to other parts of her body. There was hardly any hope of a recovery. The doctors at the AIIMS initially refused to even admit her on the ground that her health was so bad that she could hardly hope to survive a week, and that giving her a bed in the cancer ward would deprive another patient with better chances of survival. Eventually she was admitted and put on chemotherapy. She responded exceptionally well and, in less than a year the doctors found, to their amazement, that clinically no traces of cancer were left in her body. One of them assigned this to 'her will power and her faith in God'.

At a later stage, Ganga Devi narrated at length how she escaped a breast operation by a quack in Madhubani, and about her painful journey to Delhi. This being a further record of her agonising personal predicament and an eye-opener about the plight of many villagers in India, I shall quote it at length:

> When my illness persisted, I left my village for Madhubani Hospital. The doctors examined me and decided to operate upon me the day after. They asked me to deposit the requisite fees the next day. Then I went to the Madhubani Office. Jha Sahib[12] told me not to undergo any operation in Madhubani. He offered to take me to Darbhanga. In Darbhanga, Dr. Hemchandra examined me. He just tied a band around my arm and was able to ascertain what was wrong with me. He did not reveal to me that I was suffering from cancer. He advised me to proceed immediately to the AIIMS in New Delhi. I suspected that there was something serious about my health, otherwise he would not advise me to go to Delhi instead of treating me in Darbhanga. Immediately after that I went to Chatara to visit my brother. Exactly at that time one of my brothers returned from Nepal in a state of ill health. Soon after his return he died. In my brother's house they all said : 'Now there is this unfortunate incident of your brother's death, you should therefore postpone going to Delhi'. When I was still in Chatara, Dr. Hemchandra happened to come there. He was perturbed that I was still in Bihar and had not yet gone to Delhi for treatment. I knew I had a *gitti*, lump, in my breast. But I wondered what

was so serious about it that all my relatives were crying. I had been to Delhi before, but no one had cried then.

Next day I left Chatara for Madhubani to catch a bus for Patna to proceed to Delhi. I caught an early morning bus. It was raining heavily and there were floods everywhere. As the bus was moving towards Patna railway station, the police stopped it, saying that due to heavy flooding ahead all traffic was closed. The bus was diverted to Goraul. I was hungry, but there was no food available at the railway station. At about 2 a.m. a train came which brought me to Hajipur. From Hajipur I took a scooter rickshaw to Patna. By this time I was completely drenched, as it was raining heavily and incessantly. First we went to the house of an acquaintance from Chatara. I could not eat there or stay there as they were non-vegetarians. Then I decided to go to Lohanipur to the house of my niece Tara. I ate my first meal in two days there and rested for a while. Now it was found that no railway reservation for Delhi was available for the next three or four days. For this period, I continued to stay with my niece in Lohanipur. On the fourth day I took a train to Delhi. On reaching the Delhi railway station, I did not know where to go and what to do. Then I came to the Crafts Museum. It was lunch-time then. I sat under the roof near the bamboo trees in the Village Complex.[13] Later I went to the Director's office and squatted outside there. Anil[14] saw me and enquired: 'Mataji, what has happened to you?' I told him all about my plight. Dr Jain came out and talked to me. He arranged for me to go to the AIIMS. In the beginning, the hospital authorities did not pay much attention to me, but later on when letters were sent to them by Pupul Jayakarji and the Health Minister, I was admitted in the hospital. Soon after that I received Rs 5,000 from Rajiv Gandhi for my treatment. Sonia Gandhi came to see me. She enquired about my health and presented a shawl to me.

After the initial period of about a month of chemotherapy, and after she had responded well to the treatment, the doctors discharged Ganga Devi from hospital but advised her to stay in Delhi for at least a year for periodic check-ups and further treatment. A green-room attached to one of the theatres at the Crafts Museum was vacated to provide accommodation for her. She was attended to by Sajjan, her brother's son, and Shanti Devi, another brother's daughter-in-law. Occasionally, when I went to the Museum in the early hours of the morning, I found her washing clothes or drying her hair in the sun after her bath, or engaged in her morning ritual of worshipping the *tulsi* plant. In a couple of months she felt perfectly well and once mentioned to me that, regardless of what the doctors said, she was going to be fully cured and live several more years. To everyone's amazement she did.

It was during this period that Ganga Devi twice visited Japan. Tokio Hasegawa,[15] one of the greatest admirers of her paintings, who had known her for many years, would visit her periodically at the Museum during her illness. During her stays in Japan she did some twenty paintings which are now in the Mithila Museum collection in the Niigata prefecture. Her last work, *The Clove Tree*, was also painted in Japan. She was unable to complete it because she had to return to India for her regular check-ups.

In the two years that Ganga Devi spent at the Crafts Museum, she painted a *kohbar-ghar*, a nuptial chamber. She completed painting the room in about five months. Ganga Devi's *kohbar-ghar* at the Crafts Museum is not

only the most complete document of the iconography and symbolism of such paintings of the Kayasths of Mithila, but is also one of the rare surviving examples of a multichrome painting by her (as she normally worked in black and red inks only), and of her wall-painting as such. The painting bears her characteristic signature.[16]

The news of Ganga Devi's illness had spread widely through newspaper reports and occasional television programmes and interviews. People often came to her to buy her work, for which they were willing to pay very high prices. Ganga Devi invariably refused such commissions, instead engaging herself in working on a series of autobiographical paintings illustrating such incidents as her brother's death in Chatara in the context of her own illness; her tedious journey from Madhubani to Delhi in torrential rains and floods, and her experience of the painful treatment she received in the cancer wards of the hospital in Delhi.

These paintings bear testimony not only to the most unfortunate of human tragedies, but also to the fact that Ganga Devi could find solace in retelling her story through painting and painting alone. She could bear all her miseries perhaps because she was able to see Ganga Devi, the artist, as distinct from Ganga Devi the unfortunate first wife of Sukhdev Laldas of the Rasidpur village in Mithila. These four autobiographical paintings are discussed in detail in the last chapter of this book.

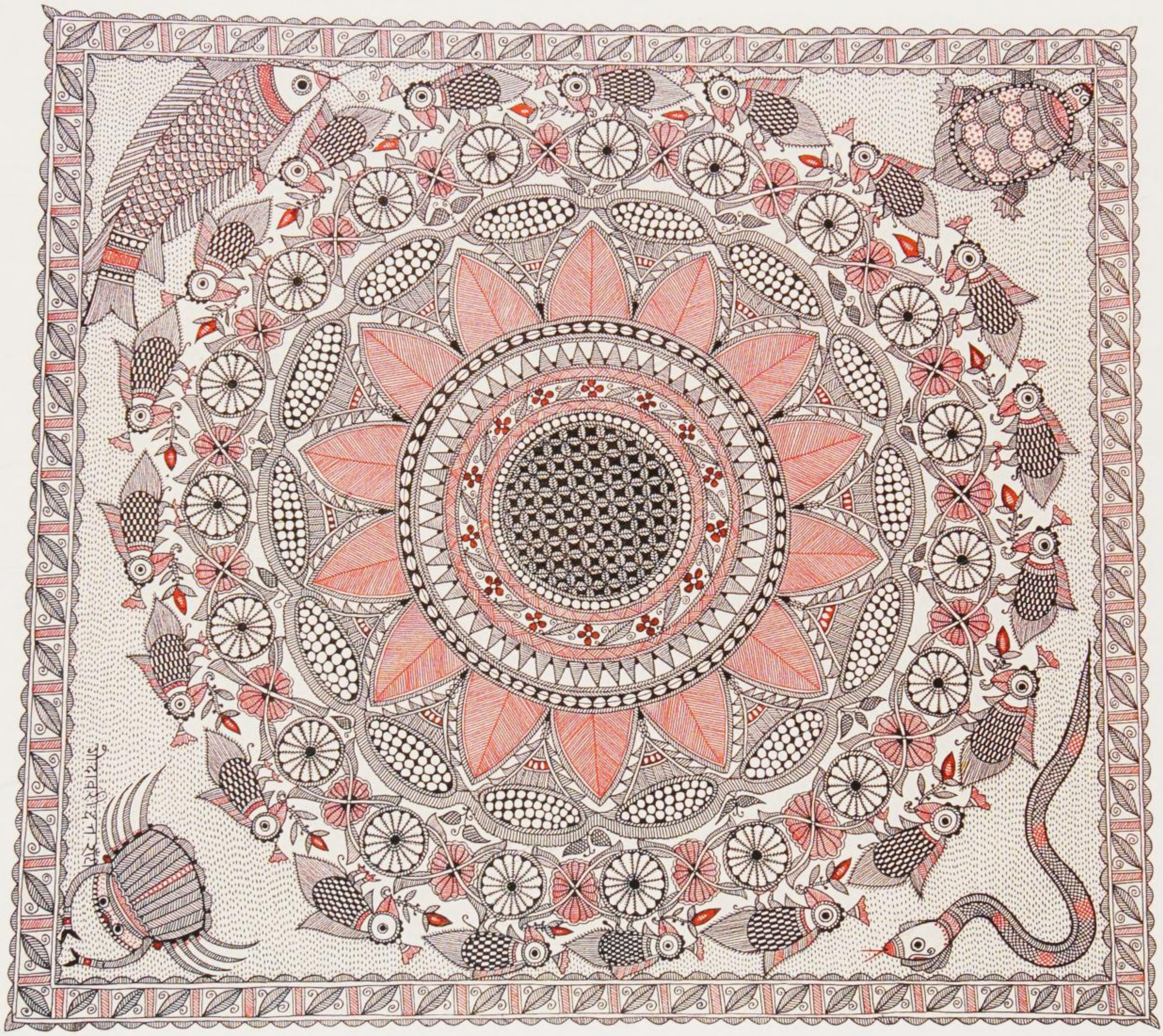
When staying at the Crafts Museum, Ganga Devi once expressed a desire to make a will. She told the lawyer that she wanted to will her house in Rasidpur (the only property that she owned) to her co-wife's son, Hareram Laldas, born of her husband. I was surprised to hear that she was planning to will her assets to the offspring of her co-wife who, according to her, had caused her so much pain and suffering. To this she responded: 'After all, he is born of my husband and therefore he is my son. After my death he will perform my last rites. This life of mine has passed in misery, perhaps due to my bad *karmas* from the last life. If my last rites are not performed properly and according to the scriptures, my next life too will be ruined.'

When Ganga Devi returned from her second trip to Japan in September 1990, she went to Rasidpur for a couple of months. After a month or so, I received a message from Rasidpur saying that Ganga Devi had been lying unconscious for several days after suffering a head injury. I arranged for her to be brought to Delhi. Once again I took her to the AIIMS, where she underwent brain surgery. After forty-eight hours she regained consciousness. She was in great pain. After five or six days, as the pain receded, she talked about her head injury. She said, that one afternoon, when she was having a nap, lying on the floor in one of the rooms of her house in Rasidpur, her co-wife's son came in and, trying to pick up something from the shelf above her, dropped a heavy glass bottle which fell straight on her head. After that she became unconscious. When narrating this incident, she began to weep bitterly and told me that she was disgusted with Rasidpur and that, if she lived, she would never go there again. She also said that if she did not survive, she should be cremated in Delhi and her last rites be performed by Sajjan, her brother's son who had looked after her throughout her prolonged illness.

For many years Ganga Devi had taught painting to Gopal Madhav, who had acquired great proficiency in draughtsmanship and, to some extent, had absorbed Ganga Devi's pictorial style and begun to earn a decent living through painting. Ganga Devi used to describe him as her only disciple. When she underwent brain surgery, a great deal of blood was required for transfusion, which Gopal Madhav was asked to donate. He not only refused but disappeared from the scene for days together. Fortunately, Ganga Devi never learnt of this, dying within a fortnight of the operation.

Ganga Devi died on 21 January 1991 at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. Her body was brought to the Crafts Museum where, coincidentally, about twenty women painters from Mithila were present. Her last rites were performed by Sajjan and Gopal Madhav.

Traditions of Painting in Mithila



Mithila, the birthplace of Sita and home of the great medieval poet Vidyapati, was part of the ancient kingdom of Videha during the later Vedic age. Tirabhukti was another name for Mithila, and it gained popularity during the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.[1] The name Tirhut, a British division in North Bihar comprising Darbhanga, Saran, Champaran and Muzzaffarpur districts, appears to have been derived from Tirabhukti.

Historically, the name Mithila has been more frequently used for a somewhat fluid cultural region than for a definite political or geographical unit. Mithila once included about 20,000 square miles of territory in modern Bihar, covering the districts of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Vaishali, Muzzaffarpur, Champaran, Monghyr, Saharsa and Purnea, and about 10,000 square miles in Nepal, including the regions of Rohtara, Sarilahi, Mohitari, Saptari, and Morang.[2]

Mithila is one of those historic seats of Indian culture where ancient ritual practices have survived unhindered for centuries. Several traditions of women's floor – and wall-painting were associated with these ritual practices, and continued till recently in their orthodox form. When Maithil Brahmins, Mahapatras and Kayasths performed the *samskaras*, the rites of passage or initiation of the individual, the women of these communities conventionally drew geometric diagrams known as *aripan* on floors plastered with mud and cow-dung, their fingers dipped in rice paste. On the space thus ritually captured, a sacred installation of a pot or a plate was made. Marriages were consummated in the *kohbar-ghar*, the nuptial chamber, that was decorated with symbolic wall-paintings imbued with magical properties. Wall-paintings were also done near the *gosain-ghar*, the shrine of the family deity situated in a corner of the kitchen. On the sacred day of Durgashtami ('the eighth day of the goddess Durga'), both the walls flanking the kitchen door were richly painted with images of Durga astride her lion. During marriages and festivals, the outer walls of houses were embellished with decorative motifs and mythological scenes.

These ritual-bound traditions of floor and wall-paintings by women were still very prevalent in the 1960s, when paper, the surface for painting, was introduced into Mithila. Once the paintings descended from walls to scrolls, they became freer in expression, even when facing a greater challenge. Several women painters of Mithila, till then constrained by the limited possibility of painting prescribed motifs on a fixed surface meant for a specific ritual occasion, began to exploit the great opportunity for individual artistic expression and experimentation provided by the availability of paper. Among the finest women artists of Mithila who used the opportunities created by paper were Ganga Devi and Mahasundari Devi of the Kayasth community, and Sita Devi and Baua Devi, both Brahmins.

These artists' departure from the repetitive painting of magical symbols, ritual motifs, and iconography connected with the *kohbar-ghar, gosain-ghar*, Durgashtami, and the *aripan* which they had inherited as part of the living collective tradition of celebrating annual rites and rituals, gradually led to distinctive artistic creations both in terms of subject-matter and the corresponding innovation of a new formal vocabulary. They however remained strongly rooted in the actual ritual practices of the inherited

Previous page
Kamaldah or lotus pond;
Godavari Dutt, 1995;
ink on paper;
20 cm x 20 cm;
collection: artist; Ranti, Madhubani.

religious traditions of Mithila, and their artistic transformation in the direction of individual expression was not a simple case of 'departure from the tradition of applied art to arrive at a work of art in its own right'.[3]

There is ample evidence of the 'arrival' of 'a work of art in its own right' in the works of these artists, but the necessity for, and the nature of, departure from the tradition needs elaboration. One form of artistic innovation relates to reusing motifs, stylistic elements, and pictorial devices from preceding eras.[4] All tradition-bound artists working in their own age respond to past artistic conventions either by mechanically repeating them for applied purposes, or by reinterpreting earlier forms and images to create new contexts in which the former reappear as new symbols that evoke a sense of surprise and wonder, in which the familiar becomes the unfamiliar. But such a joyous journey into the unfamiliar would not have been possible without a knowledge or experience of the familiar (the tradition). In the case of the Mithila artists, collective tradition and individual expression have acted as complementary processes. Such processes must have been integral to the artistic expression of all ages in the past, but the cultural historian's preoccupation with preserving an 'authentic' past imbued with 'mythic consciousness'[5] has often undermined the role of artistic innovation.

As this volume deals with the life and work of Ganga Devi, with specific concern for the interrelationship between the collective traditions of painting in Mithila and the emergence of individual artistic expression, it is necessary to understand the nature of the tradition itself. While the following chapters will deal with the various phases of Ganga Devi's strongly individualistic works, this chapter discusses the traditions of painting in Mithila and their religious and cultural contexts. Among others, Ganga Devi has been used as a prime informant in reconstructing the picture of the ritual and artistic heritage of the region, not only on account of her deep roots in that culture, but as much to recapture her point of view of it, for it has played a central role in making her work unique.

One of the most striking cultural features of Mithila is the sharp contrast that its people perceive between consecrated space, the space that has been ritually acquired after performing prescribed rites of sanctification, and ordinary space which is dangerous, chaotic, unfit for habitation, and teeming with evil spirits. For any space to become worthy of habitation by human beings, it must first be ordained by a ritual in the course of which the deities invoked descend to the site and consecrate or recreate the space, in much the same sense as an upper caste child is given a new birth in the brahmanic social order through sacraments of initiation which make him 'twice born'. Also comparable is the initiation of a sacred image which is made worthy of worship by rites of consecration known as *prana-pratishtha* or 'infusion of spirit'. Before that, the image is not sacred, merely a piece of metal or stone, an alien object; only after consecration does it become possessed of spirits and thus sacred and worthy of worship. Similarly, a space not ritually recaptured or recreated by consecration and ritual purification is an alien space, a nonentity.

The Mithila wall-paintings of the *kohbar-ghar, gosain-ghar,* for Durgashtami, and the *aripan* floor paintings too, have a very strong ritual

Opposite page
Top
A view of the main wall of a *kohbar-ghar;* Jitwarpur, Madhubani, 1981; Photo: Mary Lanius, Denver, Colorado.

Bottom
Maha Sundari Devi, the renowned Mithila artist making *aripan*, floor painting, in her house in Ranti, Madhubani: Mithila Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Top right
A woman making *aripan*, floor painting, Jitwarpur, Madhubani 1985; Photo: Mary Lanius, Denver, Colorado.

dimension related to the consecration and magical reclamation of an alien space. This objective of converting a profane space into a sacred one not only determines the general iconography and layout of the traditional paintings, but governs the nature of the basic pictorial imagery itself.

Kohbar

The precise etymology of the word *kohbar* is not known. The word is popularly used in eastern Uttar Pradesh and almost throughout Bihar, especially in the Mithila region, to denote pictorial renderings of auspicious symbols done on the walls of the nuptial chamber, wherein a few of the most important wedding rituals are conducted.

Among the Kayasths of Mithila, the word *kohbar* refers on the one hand, to the elaborate paintings executed in the nuptial chamber of the house of the bride; these include a large central motif, in highly stylised from, of a

lotus plant known as the *purain*. On the other hand, the same word is used for the wrapping paper for *sindur*, vermilion, sent by the bridegroom for the bride; the paper has a painted image of the same lotus plant. All this suggests that, for the Kayasths of Mithila, the word *kohbar* essentially denotes the central *purain* motif. The painted nuptial chamber of the bride with this central motif surrounded by a number of others is also known as *kohbar* or the *kohbar-ghar* on account of the presence of this particular motif. At the bridegroom's home too, a rudimentary *kohbar* is painted on the wall, with only the stylised lotus plant motif depicted. From the use of the word *kohbar* for all three situations, it appears that this essentially denotes the lotus plant motif, which is common to all.

From surviving living traditions, and after several conversations with the Kayasths and Brahmins of Mithila, it becomes apparent that the convention of elaborately painting the walls of the *kohbar-ghar* was primarily a Kayasth custom, and that the Maithil Brahmins adopted it from them in recent times. According to Ganga Devi, a Kayasth, the Brahmins earlier merely placed five impressions of the palm dipped in rice paste on one of the walls of the nuptial chamber, which they called a *kohbar*. Only vermilion was applied over the impressions of the palm.[6]

Ganga Devi maintained that it was primarily during the 1960s, when paper was widely introduced in Mithila to convert the traditions of ritual floor – and wall-painting into a portable 'craft' yielding both prestige and income, that Brahmin women began to paint more elaborate *kohbar* walls. In support of this, she pointed out that the lack of an older tradition of *kohbar* painting, led Brahmin women to haphazardly paint only a few of the required sets of motifs and symbols, and that their *purain* (lotus plant) had only ten, rather than fifteen, leaves. She also pointed out that Brahmin betrothals and marriages often took place in quick succession, leaving little time for the painting of an elaborate *kohbar:* constraining them to merely put five imprints of the palm on the wall. Though the account appears to be somewhat biased against the art of the Brahmins, it might be pointed out that the Brahmin tradition of *kohbar* painting was undoubtedly less elaborate and more casual than that of the Kayasths. This, however, does not mean that the Brahmins are lesser painters. Though their *kohbar* tradition was less elaborate, they created intricate and attractive wall-paintings to mark some *samskaras*, such as the sacred thread ceremony, the celebration of *Durgashtami*, or when family shrines were being set up or restored.

Painted Wrappers for Vermilion Powder

The Kayasth rituals of marriage are among the most elaborate in Mithila. The community attaches great significance to *sindurdan,* the offering of vermilion to the bride by the bridegroom; to the offering of vermilion to the *kohbar* and *bans*, bamboo grove which are painted in the *kohbar-ghar*; and to the offering of vermilion in *gauri-puja*, or the worship of the goddess Gauri during and after marriage ceremonies. The vermilion used on these occasions comes from the bridegroom's family; it is packed in five paper wrappers, each adorned with a specific painted motif by the women of the

bridegroom's extended family. These five motifs are the *kamaldah* or *barri,* lotus pond or lotus fruit motif; *kohbar*, lotus plant; *dasavatara*, the ten incarnations of Vishnu; *bans*, the bamboo grove, and another *kohbar* motif. With regard to the order of presentation of these packets there seem to be divergent views among the Kayasths of Mithila. According to some, the wrapper of the first packet of vermilion offered by the bridegroom's party on arrival at the bride's place has the *kamaldah* or the lotus pond motif, whereas others believe that it should be the *bans* or the bamboo grove motif.

The *kamaldah* motif

On the day of the wedding, as the bridegroom reaches the bride's house, the groom's close relatives hand over to the bride's family a *thal* (tray) containing, among other things, crystal sugar, a sari for the bride, and a packet of vermilion wrapped in a paper on which the *kamaldah* motif is painted in red ink. There is no fixed form in which this motif is rendered. Generally, the entire sheet is conceived as a lotus pond, bound on four sides by ornate borders, as it were representing the side walls of the pond. In the middle, richly proliferating lotus plants are depicted. Every artist has the freedom to conceive and render the motif in accordance with her own imagination and artistic vision. In consequence, each pond in these paintings differs from others, thus eliminating the constraints imposed by the mechanical copying of an inherited form. This 'breathing space' between the prescribed motif and the freedom of pictorial conceptualisation provides Mithila women with the opportunity to be innovative – an opportunity that the makers of Hindu images, rooted in fixed canons of art and architecture, often did not have. The centre of the 'lotus pond' is generally occupied by a neatly worked out circular medallion with an intricate geometric pattern. Around this proliferates, in symmetrical and configured fashion, a dense growth of stylised lotus leaves, flowers, and fruits.

Each artist formalises the buds, flowers, leaves, fruit, and even the birds and bees in her own way, reducing them to highly simplified two-dimensional but ornate motifs – all united into a single floral disc interconnected by a rhythmically running lotus stem, almost suggestive of an umbilical cord. This magnificent disc is often shown floating on water, the latter being indicated by ripples, snakes, fish, crabs, and tortoises. If painting a *kamaldah* on the wrapper is intended to enhance a bride's fertility, the women painters of Mithila have truly succeeded in evoking the qualities of fecundity that pervade a lotus pond.

The *kohbar* motif

After completing the ritual of *kanyadan*, 'giving away the bride', under the marriage canopy, the bride and groom shift to the *vedi* or fire altar for further rites. Here the groom puts vermilion in the central parting of bride's hair. The powder, wrapped in a sheet painted with the *kohbar* motif in red, is then placed in a basket, along with new clothes, a small jar of *ghee*, *nathia,* a nose ring, etc. for the bride. After ritually accepting these presents from the groom's family, the bride dons the new clothes and ornaments, while a closely related family member applies some *ghee* in the central parting of her hair which is then filled with vermilion by the groom.

The pre-eminently sacred *kohbar* motif is in the form of a stylised lotus plant, its central stem, with a well-defined root and *muri* (head), surrounded by fifteen *patta* (literally 'leaves', but actually intricately ornamented discs). The lotus plant thus painted occupies most of the central space of this wrapper for *sindur*, but in the interstices other symbols of fertility, such as the bamboo grove, the sun and moon, the fish and tortoise, etc. are also added.

As in the case of the *kamaldah*, the only convention the artist must abide by is the iconographic detail of the *kohbar*, but the entire design of the stem, leaves, and other elements, as well as their spacing and schema, is left to the painter's own ideas, giving her total freedom in artistic conceptualisation.

The *dasavatara* motif

During the ceremony, when the bride's face is unveiled to the gathering, a packet of vermilion is once more supplied to the bride by the groom's family. The vermilion, wrapped in paper with painted motifs of the *dasavatara*, is placed in an open basket near the couple. The groom's relatives see the bride's face and offer her ornaments or money, which are placed in the basket. Later, the basket and the bridal couple are taken to the *gosain-ghar*, the shrine of the family deities, where the basket is kept for a couple of days. After paying homage to the family deities, the couple goes to the *kohbar-ghar* and offers vermilion (left over in the previous wrapper) to the painted *kohbar* and *bans* on the central wall of this chamber.

The *dasavatara* painted on the wrapper usually has two horizontal rows of five rectangular compartments, each with a depiction of one incarnation of Vishnu that is primarily identifiable by an iconographic emblem.

Once the wedding is over, the groom's entourage and family return to their villages, but leave the groom behind for further rituals, including *chaturthi*, 'the ritual of the fourth day', which is held in the *kohbar-ghar*. As the groom's party leaves, the bride's parents hand over to them all the ornaments collected in the basket in which the *dasavatara* packet of vermilion was also placed during the 'face-showing' ceremony. The cash collected is counted and, after adding some more, it is given over to the groom's parents. The latter return the basket with yet another packet of vermilion, this time with the *bans* motif painted on the wrapper. This vermilion is used for the daily *gauri-puja* ritual to be performed by the bride.

The *bans* motif

In the depiction of the bamboo grove or *bans* motif, the women artists of Mithila show their flair in reducing a natural object to its finest essence – not through mere abstraction, but by turning it into a graphic symbol with powerful pictorial characteristics.

The second *kohbar* motif

The wrapper of the fifth packet of vermilion once again has a painted *kohbar*. This packet is given by the groom's family to the bride's on *chaturthi*, when consummation takes place. The vermilion in the packet is offered to the bride by the groom in the *kohbar-ghar* and a portion of it by both bride and groom to the *kohbar* and *bans* motifs painted in the nuptial chamber.

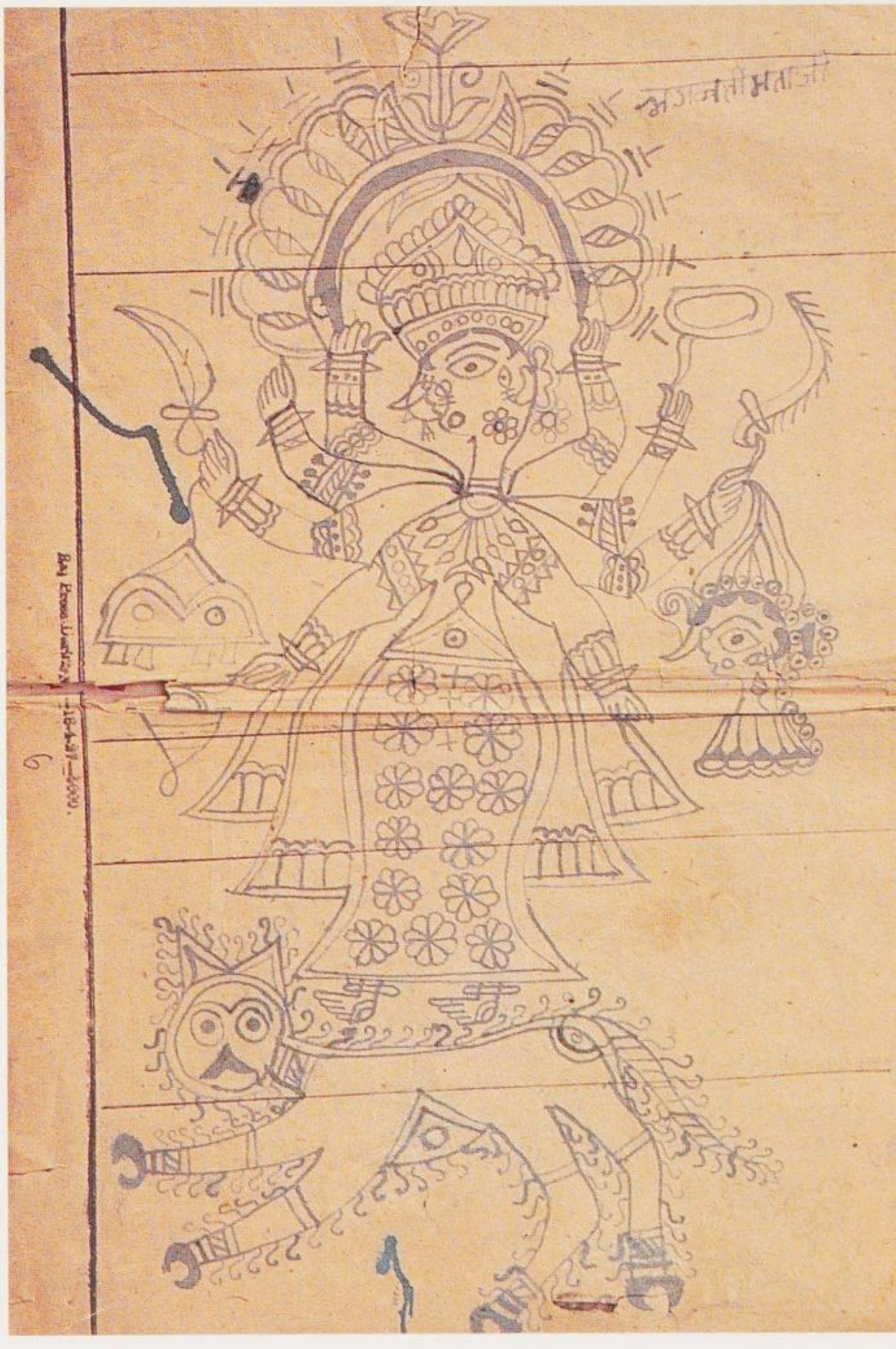
Painting on Paper

Modern mill-made or thick handmade paper on which Mithila paintings are executed today were neither available nor used in Mithila much before the 1960s. Most of the elderly Maithil women recollect that varieties of paper were introduced to Mithila by representatives of the All India Handicrafts Board as part of their endeavour to develop the so-called 'Madhubani painting' as a *handicraft*.[7] The widespread commercialisation of these paintings led to a great demand for mill-made or thick handmade paper.[8] A printing press, proverbially known in the villages of Mithila as Gupta Press (situated in the town of Madhubani), began to stock paper of these varieties to retail to the women artists of the region. According to Ganga Devi, the handmade paper sold by the Gupta Press came principally from Pune in Maharashtra.

Before the introduction of thick, white paper by representatives of the All India Handicrafts Board, for painting their *sindur* wrappers the women of Mithila traditionally used a coarse variety of Nepali paper known as *basaha*, which in its natural shade was a deep beige. This paper, commonly available

Left
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Shri Ravanji;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection.

Right
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Shri Bhagavati Mataji;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection.



at grocery shops, was thin but fibrous and strong. According to one artist, Godavari Dutta, in some villages it was customary to paste the five painted wrappers on cloth and use these for several weddings, while in other villages the wrappers were required to be painted afresh on each occasion. These monochrome paintings, mostly in red (the *bans* motif alone was in green), were done with a bamboo twig on beige rice paper; their rich and exuberant line work, and the subtle contrast of beige against red or green, was missing in later creations on the tarred brown paper or bleached white paper introduced by the All India Handicrafts Board. Thereafter, unfortunately, no one thought of painting on the conventional Nepali paper.

Apart from the painted paper wrappers for vermilion, there was a widespread tradition among the Kayasths of Mithila of keeping painted 'notes' on paper. Every woman with some flair for painting would create such a notebook by binding together a few sheets of paper with miniature drawings of such motifs as the *kohbar*, *bans*, *kamaldah*, fish, tortoise, birds in union, and the images of popular deities. These were occasionally in the form of rough sketches and exercises, and sometimes contained copies of drawings by a more talented woman artist of the family or original drawings passed on from one generation to the next. The 'notes' were used as references or aide-memoires when younger artists undertook *kohbar* and *gosain-ghar* wall-painting.

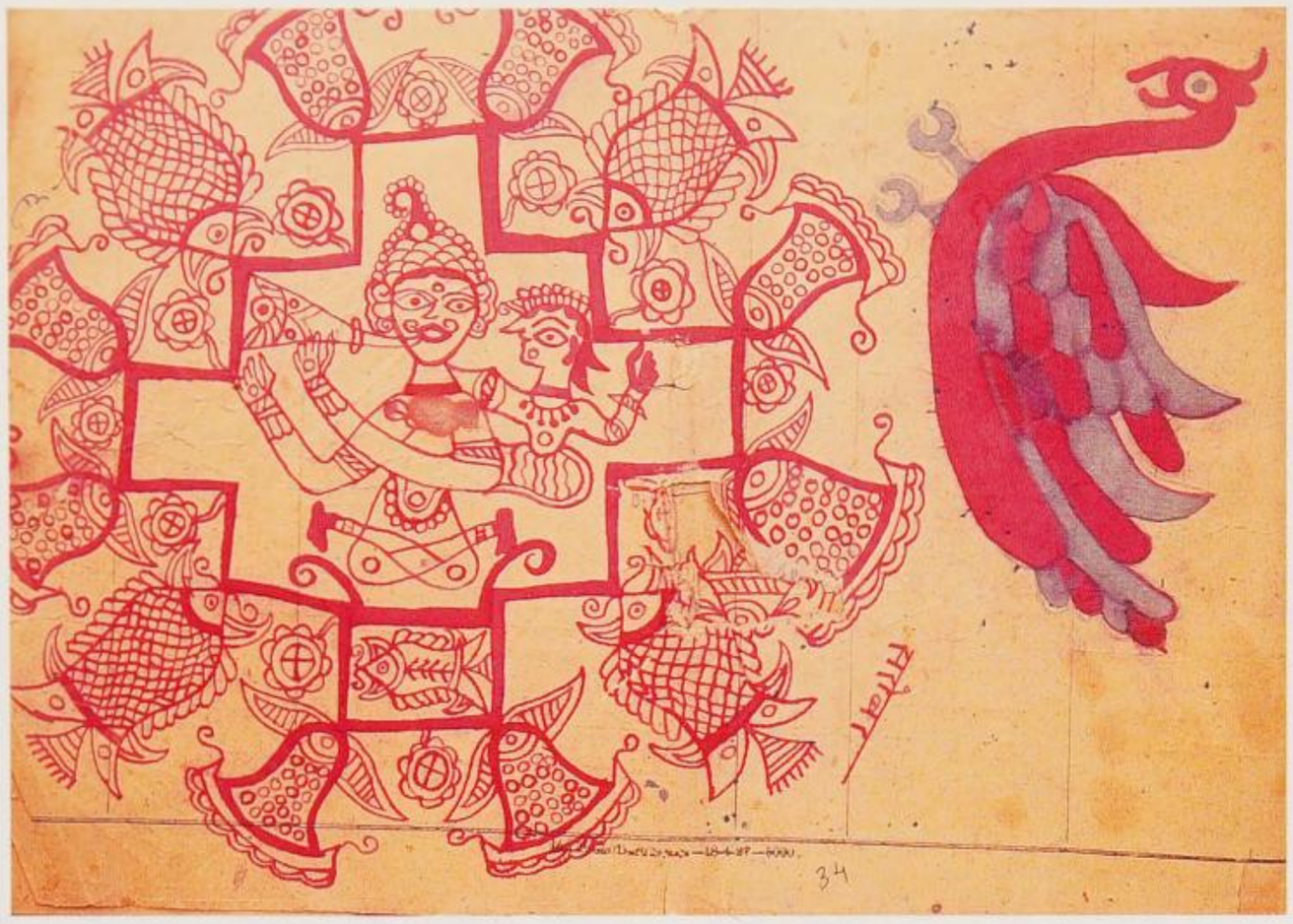
A notebook has been discovered that belonged to Ganga Devi. It contains designs for embroidery, sketches of gods, goddesses, and sacred motifs pertaining to the iconography of the *kohbar* and other ritual wall-paintings. This notebook comprises sheets of paper from printed registers of land records and those of petitions received and disposed during the British Raj.[9] Each sketch is inscribed with a title to help in identifying its iconography. A comparative study of these sketches drawn by Ganga Devi when she was about sixteen and her later drawings on paper strongly suggests that her earlier work had greater spontaneity and vitality. Much of the magic of these early sketches by Ganga Devi was also probably present in varying measure in the works of other women painters of Mithila until the first half of the twentieth century. As soon as paper was introduced on a large scale, the output largely became lifeless and self-imitative, and remains so.

With the easy availability of paper and the resultant freedom from the fetters of ritual occasions, iconography, and fixed pictorial space, most artists mistook quantity for quality. They could neither sustain the spontaneous expression of their notebook days, nor pause for experimental and innovative expression for fear of losing sales. They fell into the trap of mass production and the tastes of a market that looked for a 'likeness' to what was by now the fashionable *Madhubani painting*, and no more.

In such a situation, it is remarkable that Ganga Devi chose not to be imitative. At one stage her work indeed began showing signs of stiffness. But Ganga Devi soon plunged into the new experimental situation, fumbled for a while, and eventually crossed to the opposite shore to discover new avenues of immense possibilities for individual representation. That story will be told at length in the following chapters.

Opposite page
Gopis performing *rasa* or circle dance around Radha and Krishna; Ganga Devi, 1986; ink on paper, 55 cm x 76 cm; Collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi; Acc. No. 87/7195.

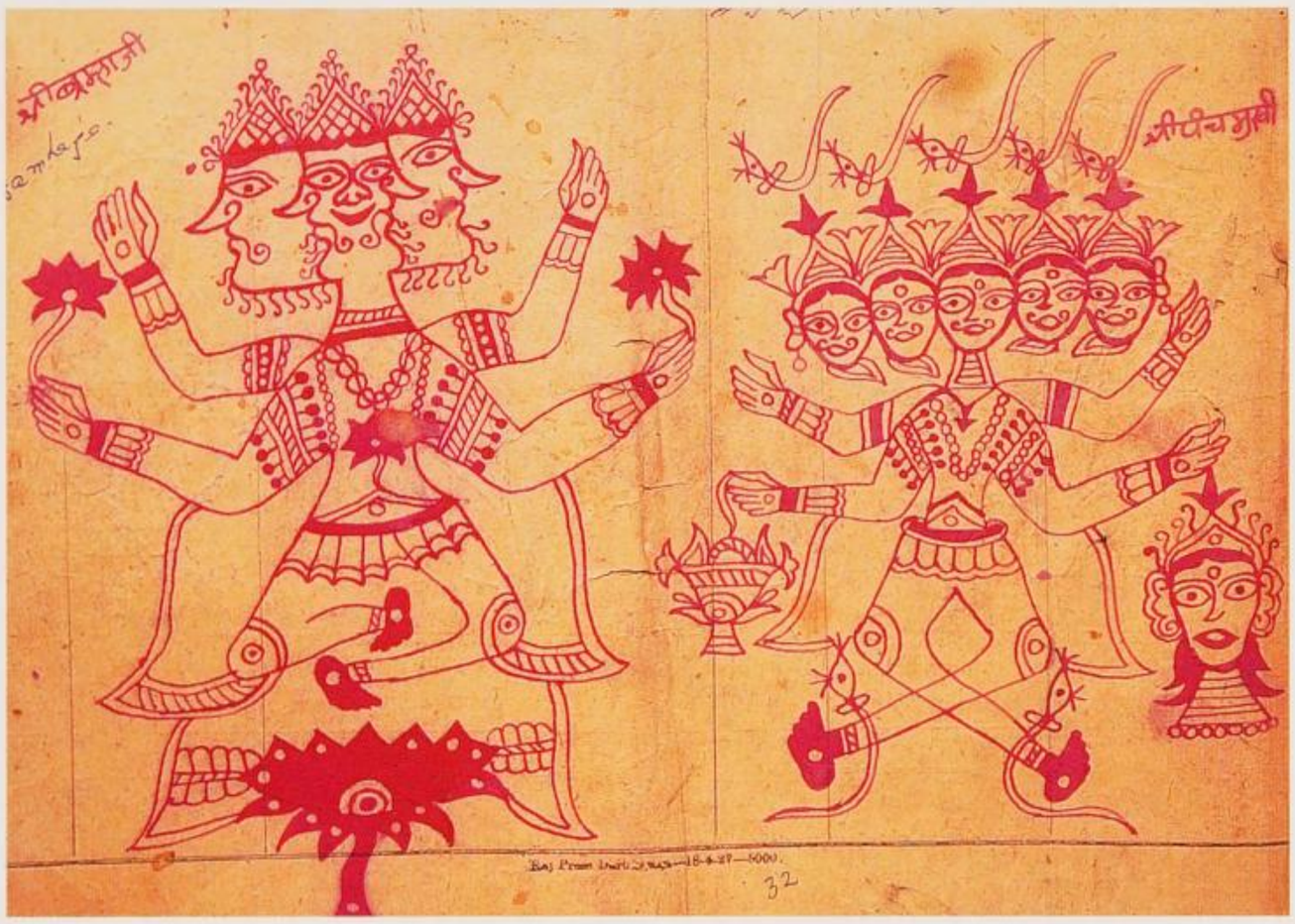
पद्म श्री शिवन देवी
ग्राम : पोस्ट रसीदपुर
भाषा = कलु आसी
जिला : मधुबनी
बिहार भारत



Left
Leaf from a sketchbook;
lotus pond;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection.

Centre
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Shri Brahmaji,
Shri Panchamukhi;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection.

Bottom
Leaf from a sketchbook;
The Youth of the Kali Age;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection,
New Delhi.

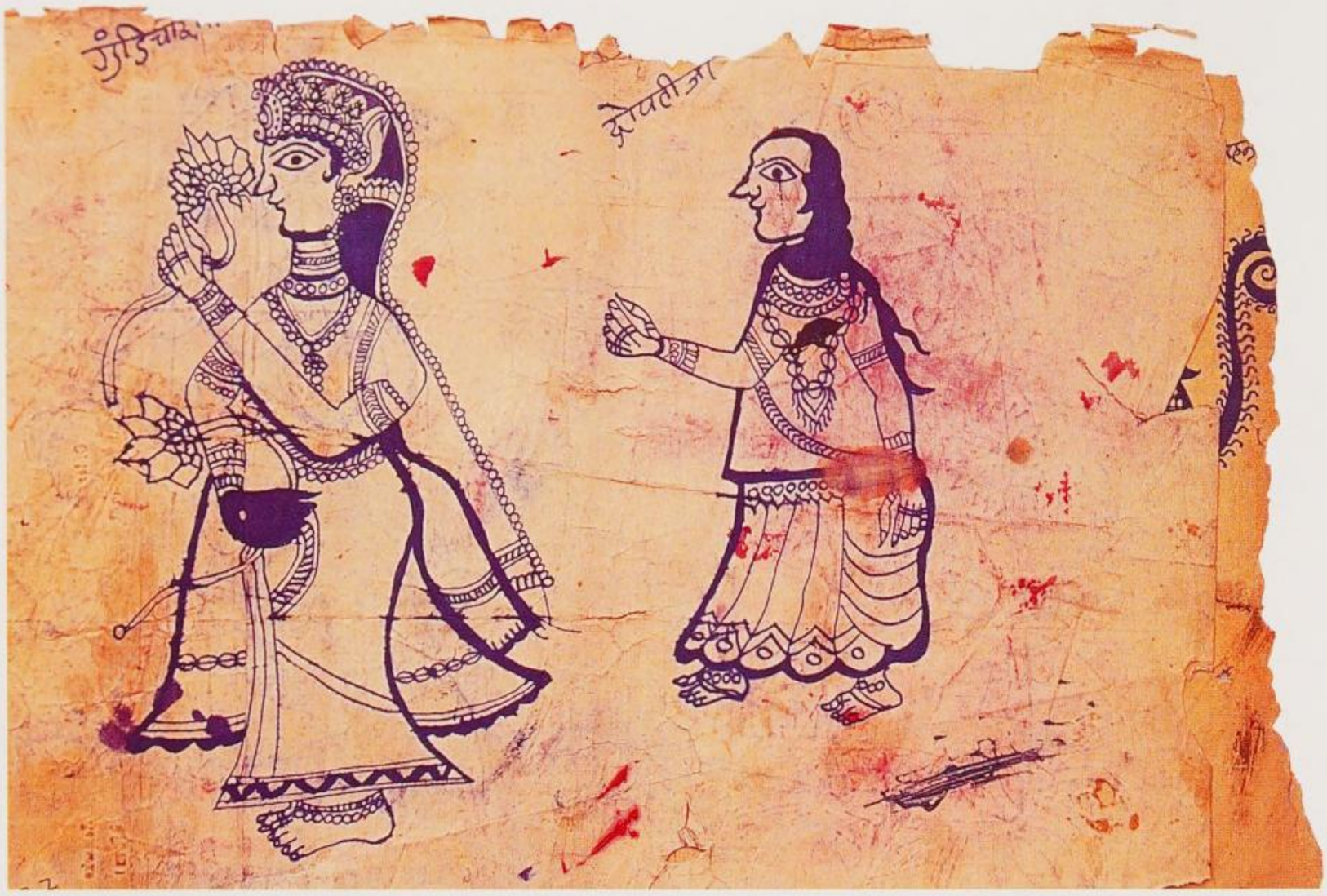


Opposite page
Top
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Shri Durga Mataji,
Shri Sitaji;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection,
New Delhi.

Bottom
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Shri Arjunji,
Kaushalya Mataji,
Shri Vir Hanuman;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper;
32 cm x 22 cm;
private collection.

श्रीसीता जी
36

श्रीरामचन्द्र जी
कौशल्यामता जी
श्रीवीरम
39



Right
Leaf from a sketchbook;
Gundicha Devi,
Draupadiji;
Ganga Devi, 1945-50;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 22 cm,
private collection.

The *Kohbar-ghar* and the Wedding Rites of Mithila

Though features of the Hindu marriage ceremony, as described in the *Dharmashastras*, are generally followed in the more tradition-bound pockets throughout most of northern India, the rituals of *triratrivrata* ('vow of three nights' of celibacy) and *chaturthikarma* ('the rite of the fourth', signifying consummation of marriage), mentioned in some early *Dharmashastras*, which have apparently lost importance elsewhere, have survived and flourished in Mithila. These two rituals have a direct connection with the present practice of the installation of a *kohbar-ghar*, as also the rituals conducted within it, and are therefore worth describing in detail here.

These rituals in Mithila not only reveal the ancient roots of the living traditions of the *kohbar-ghar* and *gauri-puja*, but also demonstrate how text and context complement each other to provide a comprehensive and meaningful picture of the complex Indian cultural situation.

Practically the entire wedding ritual at the home of the bride takes place in two separate spaces in and around the house, which are duly consecrated. Broadly, the rituals pertaining to the solemnisation of a marriage occur in the *madaba* or wedding booth and the nearby *vedi* or fire-altar, while those relating to the consummation and *gauri-puja* take place in the *kohbar-ghar*. The *angan*, or central courtyard of the house, is significant for its ritual liminality. Apart from serving as the locale for such mundane activities as receiving visitors of unknown castes and ritual status, the pounding and husking of grain, stocking agricultural tools or as the place where the barber comes to routinely shave their cheeks and cut the hair of male members of the family, the *angan* is the site for some of the most sacred activities, including the daily worship of the *tulsi,* basil, plant (for which a small shrine is installed in the courtyard and consecrated), the tonsure ceremony of a child, and for the celebration of virtually all the annual festivals and vows, together with the rites associated with the solemnisation of marriage.

On each ritual occasion, the space of the *angan* is consecrated afresh unlike the temples or divine images. The required space is therefore newly smeared with cowdung, and over this *aripan*, sacred diagrams, are drawn with a paste of pounded rice. The space thus recaptured becomes worthy of the conduct of rituals and sacred installations.

The ceremony of installing the *madaba* in Mithila is comparable to the *mandapa karana* mentioned in the *Dharmashastras*.[10] The *madaba*, comprising a thatched roof and bamboo structure, is installed in the *angan* about five days prior to the wedding. Sections of the thatched bamboo frame roof are first prepared on the ground and then placed over the structure of the booth. Then the bride-to-be places five *thapas* or impressions of her palm dipped in *pithar*, rice paste, on the structure, and worships it by anointing it with vermilion and tying a yellow cotton thread to it. On this occasion, known as *madab thatthi*,[11] married women from the bride's own caste and the neighbourhood are invited and vermilion applied to the central parting of their hair by female relatives of the bride.

The space for the *madaba* is further sanctified on the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride's house. The bridegroom is given new clothes by the bride's family on arrival, as well as subsequently on the eve of the wedding, on *chaturthi* or the 'fourth day' after the marriage, and once again on his departure from the bride's village. The reception ritual closely resembles *madhuparka*, mentioned in the *Dharmashastras*.[12]

It is interesting that, on arrival, the groom is offered a betel leaf with areca nut which had a while earlier been kept in the bride's mouth.[13] This is followed by a triple circumambulation of the *madaba* by the groom. The

Sacred imagery to be depicted on the central wall of an ideal Kayasth *kohbar-ghar*; painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989. A *kohbar* or the lotus plant motif is depicted in the centre. On its left *naina jogin*, *pan ke ghar* (betel-leaf house), *latpatia suga* (entwined parrots), *nag-nagin* (male and female cobras) are seen. On the right is the depiction of *bans* (bamboo-grove); branch of a *bel* tree and the bride, accompanied by the bridegroom, performing *gauri-puja*.

bride's brother places an earthen pot filled with water near each of the four poles of the *madaba* and leads the groom who touches each with his right hand. As the groom completes three circumambulations of the sacred space in this manner, he further sanctifies the *madaba* which had earlier, at the time of its installation, been anointed by the bride.

This is followed by another fertility ritual. The groom, along with seven male members from the bride's entourage, forms a ring around a wooden mortar placed over an *aripan* diagram on one side of the *angan*. All eight men are 'tied' together by a cotton thread wound around them by the village barber. They collectively hold a large pestle in their hands and pound some paddy in the mortar. A married female informant told me that this represented sexual union between man and woman and that every adult of the community is aware of this.[14] The belief that the curry-stone and mortar represented the female, and the roller and pestle the male, is reflected in a common custom in Mithila when every night, before the family retires, the roller is placed over the curry-stone and the pestle inside the mortar, or the mortar and pestle made to 'recline' against one another. The two should not suffer separation. My informant also told me that when young women are asked to pound rice with the mortar and pestle, they often joke about enacting a symbolic sexual act between man and woman. This perhaps illumines the significance of the common north Indian wedding rite of the bride treading on a curry-stone while circumambulating the sacred fire (*asmarohana* in the *Dharmashastras*).[15]

While the sacred space of the *madaba* is in the process of being sanctified, the *kohbar-ghar* is also consecrated. From the morning of the wedding day, the floor of the *kohbar-ghar* is smeared with wet clay nine times in succession. The barber of the bride's family places a few mango twigs on the freshly smeared floor in front of the *kohbar* wall paintings and lights a fire. The bride is seated in front of the fire. The person from the bride's family required to perform the *kanyadan,* the giving away of the bride (usually the bride's maternal uncle) also joins in the ceremony. The *purohita,* the officiating priest, intones invocatory stanzas and asks the performer of *kanyadan* to repeat them. This ritual is known as *matrika pujan* or the worship of the mother goddesses. The individual performing *kanyadan* fasts on this day. The *purohita* invokes the deities of the *kohbar-ghar*, who are offered barley, rice, sesame, flowers, sandal paste, and water from the Ganges.

In most parts of India, when religious wall paintings or portable scroll paintings are installed, both at the rural and tribal levels of worship, a ritual of consecrating them is invariably conducted.[16] As has been described above, after his reception at the bride's home and on completion of the circumambulation of the *madaba*, the bridegroom proceeds to the *kohbar-ghar* which has just been consecrated. On the arrival there of the bridegroom, the bride and her sister sit on the floor on a grass mat, facing the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar* on which the sacred motifs of *kohbar*, *bans*, etc., have been painted. The heads of the bride and her sister are completely covered. Four women from the bride's extended family, who are married and whose husbands are alive (*ahibati*), cover their heads with their saris and enter the *kohbar-ghar* to 'act' as *naina-jogins* or goddesses

with magical powers. In each of the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar* the figure of a *naina-jogin* is painted on the wall. Each of the four women, dressed as *naina-jogins* then stand in front of one of the painted figures. As he enters the *kohbar-ghar*, the bridegroom is made to circumambulate the room thrice, and whenever passing a *naina-jogin*, he halts to converse with her. The conversation comprises three routine questions posed by each *naina-jogin*, to which routine replies are given by the bridegroom.

The questions and answers are as follows:

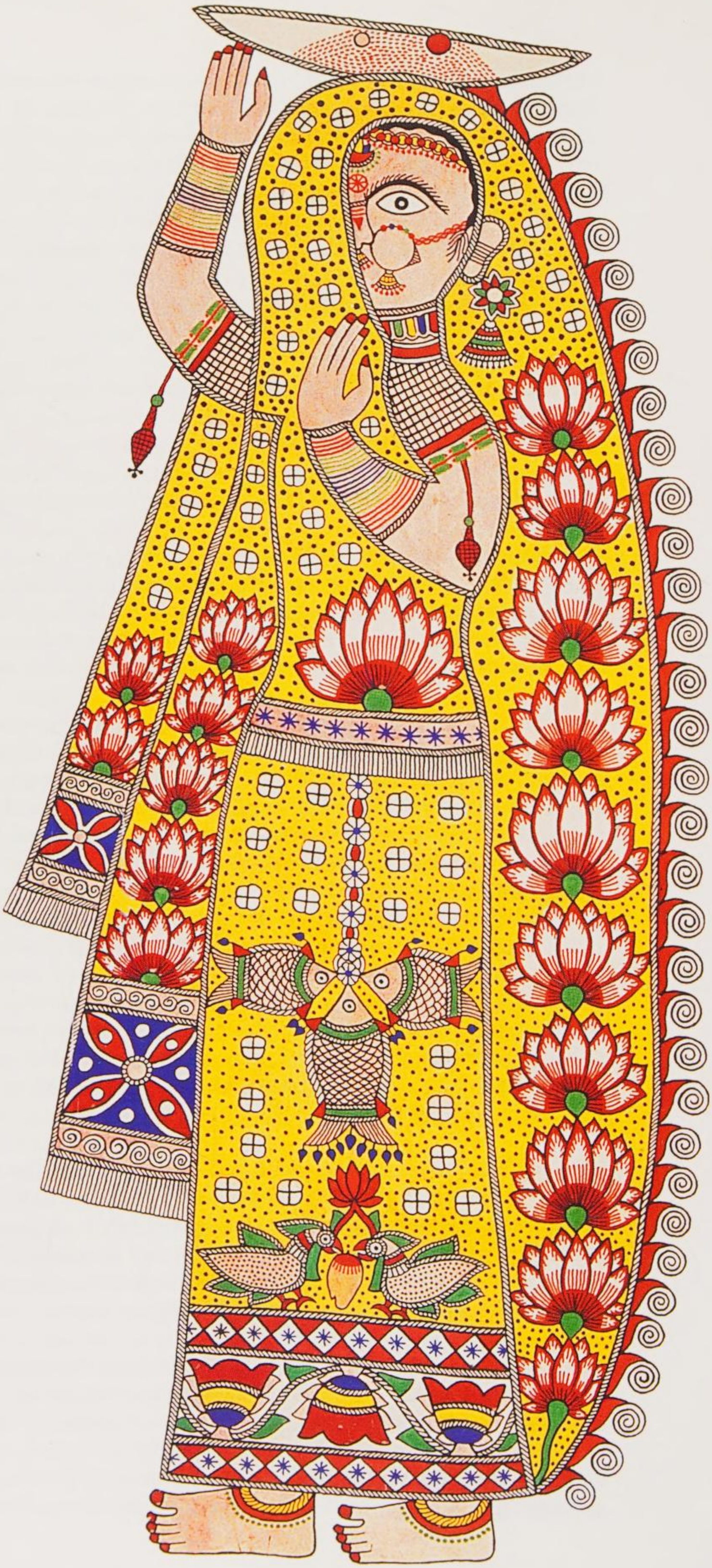
Q: Where do you come from?
A: *Kamar Kamakhya* (The Kamakhya temple of Kamarupa, i.e., Assam)
Q: What have you brought with you?
A: *Jog* (a spell or charm)
Q: Why have you come?
A: *Diksa debo ke lel ailchhi* [I have come to initiate (the bride)].

After this ritual, the groom is handed a branch of a mango tree and asked by the wife of the bride's brother to identify the bride from among the two veiled girls (the bride and her sister) seated on the floor. The bridegroom is expected to identify the bride with a light stroke of the mango branch. In the event of his identifying the wrong girl, there is a hearty laugh.

It is clear that these rituals performed in the *kohbar-ghar* have tremendous magical significance. The mysterious concept of *naina-jogin* itself, as well as pictorial rendering and ritual enactment of it, are peculiar to Mithila. The connection with Kamakhya of Kamarupa is interesting. Significantly, *naina-jogin* literally means 'eye goddess' and Kamakhya the 'goddess with charming eyes'. In the pictorial depiction of *naina-jogin* in the *kohbar-ghar*, the entire face is shown covered by a veil except one eye, which is prominently depicted, almost at the centre of the face. There is a deep-rooted belief among the women of Mithila in the magical powers of the goddess Kamakhya. It is said that several women in Mithila practise black magic to cast spells and the evil eye on their victims by initiating themselves in the *mantra*s and tantric practises related to Kamakhya. Such women are known as *dayan*, or evil spirits. Several tantric texts include Kamakshi (Kamakhya) among the deities, invoked for the destruction of victims, or to drive away enemies or evil spirits.[17]

In Mithila the word *jog* is used to connote a spell or charm. *Jog* songs[18] are sung throughout the course of a wedding ceremony to evade the influence of the evil eye and harmful spells on the bride or groom; as such, the *naina-jogins* would appear to personify the goddess Kamakhya herself, whose presence in the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar* is meant to guard the bride and groom from any possible evil or harm.

Similarly, the bridegroom's striking the bride with a mango branch has an intrinsic connection with fertility. The use of the mango branch or leaves repeatedly recurs during the wedding rites of Mithila. On the morning of the wedding, the bride and groom, separately, in their respective homes, worship a mango and a *mahua* tree by winding a *dora* or cotton thread around them in the course of five circumambulations. The threads tied by



the bride and groom are later removed and intertwined with a mango leaf, to be tied to the wrist of the groom and bride before the groom offers the bride *sindur*. The *Dharmashastras* refer also to *pratisarabandha* or amulet-tying.[19] These wristlets are removed in the *kohbar-ghar* on the day of *chaturthi* before the consummation of a marriage.[20]

Another typical wedding ritual of the Kayasths of Mithila is *kumran*. The meaning of the word is not clear, but it relates to the ritual bathing of the bride[21] on the day of *kumran*, a day prior to the actual wedding. The bride fasts throughout that day . In the morning she worships the family deity in the *gosain-ghar*. In the afternoon her body is anointed with *ubtan* paste. At night she is taken to a nearby pond; here a small portion of the ground is first smeared with clay and cowdung on which an *aripan* diagram is painted with rice paste. Then, after spreading a few freshly plucked bamboo leaves[22] over the diagram, the bride is seated on it. The women of the family spray the bride thrice with water from the pond with a winnowing fan. Then a woman veils the bride's face with her sari and takes her into the pond and bathes her.[23]

On returning home, the bride is made to sit at the entrance of *gosain-ghar* (the domestic shrine of the family deity) and make offerings. This is followed by the roasting of *dhan* (paddy) to prepare *lava,*[24] which is used the following day for the culmination of the wedding sacrament.[25] The rituals of *snapana*, *paridhapana*, and *samnahana* – making the bride bathe, wear new clothes, and girding her with a string or rope of *darbha* grass, respectively, mentioned in the *Dharmashastras*,[26] come close to those of the *kumran* day bathing of the bride described above.

Pasahin, or the ritual of smearing the body of the bride and the groom with *ubtan*, a paste made of fenugreek seeds, barley, turmeric, and mustard, also has obvious connotations with fertility. The *pasahin* begins at least five days before the actual day of the wedding, separately but identically, at the homes of the bride and the groom. Before grinding the ingredients, hymns are offered to the *kuladevata*. A ritual known as *samanjana* (anointing) mentioned in the *Dharmashastras*[27] is comparable to the *pasahin* ritual of Mithila.

Other important rituals that are performed on the actual day of the wedding include *kanyadan* (giving away of the bride), *sindurdan* (ritually applying vermilion in the central parting of the bride's hair), and *lavachhidiyav* (sprinkling roasted paddy around the fire-altar).

Kanyadan takes place under the *madaba*. The floor of the booth is consecrated by an *aripan* drawn with rice flour, and on this offerings are made. Special *aripans* are often drawn for the *kanyadan* ritual. Around midnight the bridegroom comes to the *madaba*, accompanied by his *purohita* and some male relatives. The ritual is principally conducted by the bride's *purohita*. Before the actual *kanyadan*, the formal ceremony of *gotradhyaya*, or recitation of the names of five generations of the paternal and maternal lines of the bride and groom, is performed by the *purohitas* of both sides and during this, *gotras* or clan names are also called out and checked.[28]

Previous pages
Details of wall-paintings of *kohbar-ghar* painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989, showing two of the four figures of *naina-jogin* to be depicted in the four corners of the bridal chamber.

Immediately afterwards, the *kanyadan* is performed. The hand of the bride is placed in the open palm of the right hand of the bridegroom. The relevant *mantras* are uttered by the 'giver of the bride' under the *purohita*'s guidance. Finally, the groom and bride take oaths of mutual loyalty and protection.

The solemnisation of the marriage takes place at the *vedi*, fire altar. The altar comprises a square ditch bound by four low walls of mud specially collected on the very day of the wedding from the *madaba* environs by women of the family. After the *kanyadan*, the bride wears the clothes presented by the groom's family and approaches the fire altar. The groom and bride, the *purohita*, and the 'giver of the bride' then sit around it. The mango wood already stocked in the altar as firewood is now lit by the barber on instructions from the *purohita*. *Ghee* is poured into the fire by the *purohita* intoning the relevant *mantras*.

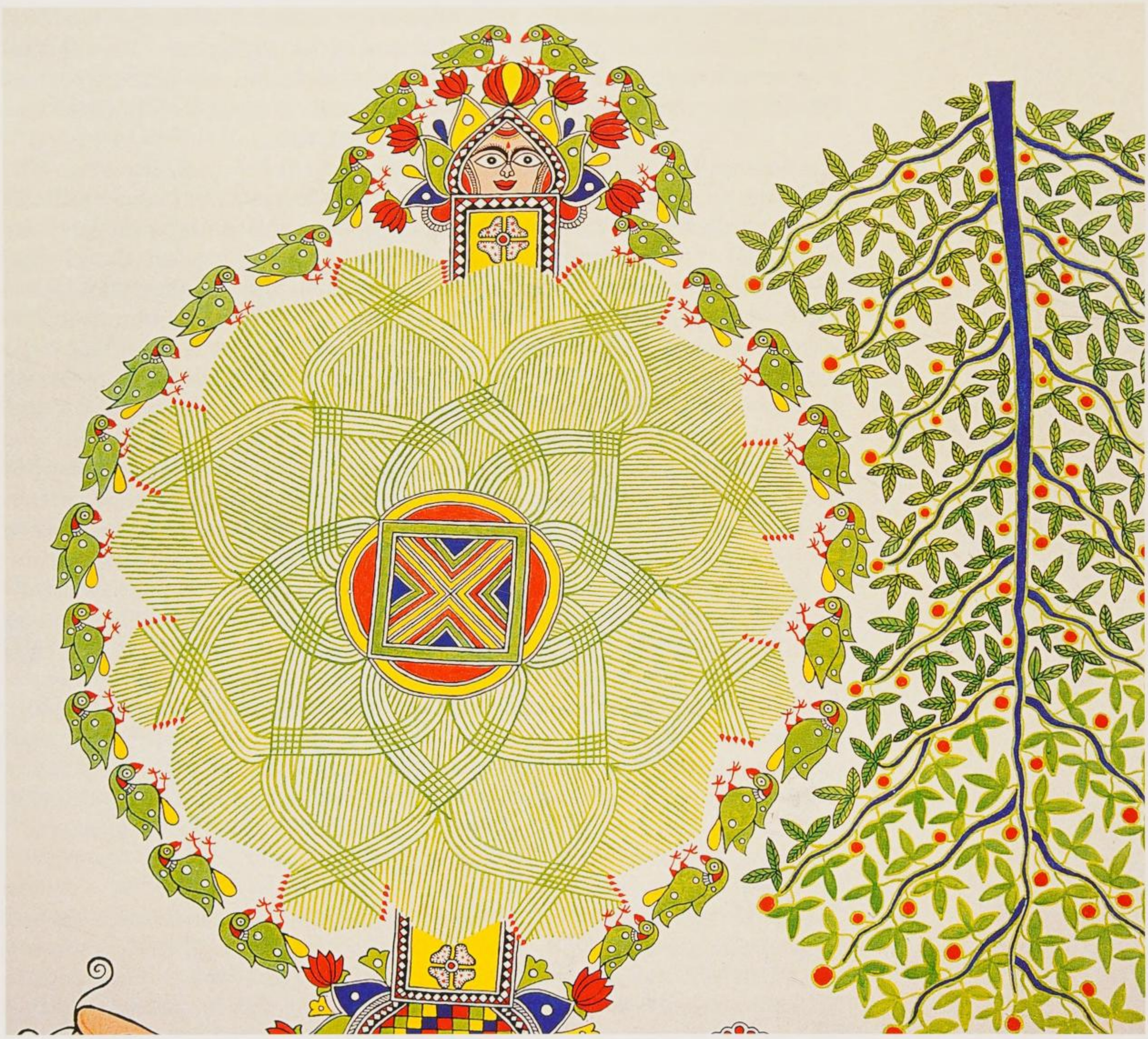
On instructions from the *purohita*, the groom gets up and stands behind the bride who remains seated, her head covered by a folded sari other than the one she is wearing. The groom removes this additional sari to uncover the bride's head and fills the central parting of her hair with vermilion. During this short period, the bride covers her face with the sari she is wearing and, once the vermilion ceremony is over she, for the first time in her life, quickly covers her head with the same sari.

The bride, considered virtually married with the completion of *sindurdan*, now gets up to jointly participate with the groom in the final ritual of solemnisation of the marriage, known as *lavachhidiyav* or 'scattering roasted paddy' (around the fire-altar).[29] This culminating ceremony, which is obviously a fertility ritual, is cited in the *Dharmashastras* as *lajahoma*[30] and, is widely practised in varying forms.

The bride, standing in front of her groom, is handed a small cone-shaped basket known as *koni-beni*, in which the brother of the bride places roasted paddy, specially procured for this ritual. Now the bridal couple circumambulates the fire altar thrice, and during this the groom, holding the hand of the bride from behind, keeps shaking it in such a way that the paddy in the *koni-beni* scatters around the altar.

In the *Dharmashastras*,[31] *lajahoma*, the bride offering fried grain to the sacred fire, and *agni-parinayana*, the groom going in front and, leading the bride around the fire, are described as two separate rituals. As described above, in Mithila, it appears that both these rituals are combined into a single one known as *lavachhidiyav*.

With the marriage so solemnised, the bridal couple returns to the wedding booth. Here the elder brother of the groom offers *ghoghat*, the veil. He places *pator*, a folded brocaded sari, over the head of the bride, and this is twice mischievously displaced by the groom and then allowed to remain on her head the third time. Finally, the bride's brother lifts her veil to show her face to the groom and his party. On this occasion the groom's family gifts cash and ornaments to the bride's family. The only parallel to this in the *Dharmashastras*[32] is the rite of *parasparasamiksana*, or 'looking at each other'. But here, in contrast to the Mithila tradition, the ritual precedes *kanyadan*.



Detail of the central wall of a *kohbar-ghar* painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989, showing the *bans* or the bamboo grove motif and branch of a *bel* tree.

Then the men and the women of the bride's family bless the bride. The men perform *durgachhat*, showering the bride with *durva* grass and rice grains, while the women perform *chuman,* touching the feet, knees, and shoulders of the bride with grains of rice and showering them over her head. In all probability *durgachhat* is a parochialised Maithili pronunciation of the Sanskrit *durvaksat.* A comparable ritual, *ardraksataropana,* is mentioned in the *Dharmashastras*.[33]

Once the wedding ceremony is complete, four or five women of the bride's family go to a nearby pond to fetch a pitcher of water, which they place over a heap of paddy alongside the installation of the goddess Gauri on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar.* The water is used four days later to ceremonially bathe the newlyweds as a part of *chaturthi*, the ritual of 'the fourth', held in the *kohbar-ghar.*

With the completion of these rituals, the scene shifts to the *kohbar-ghar.*

Detail of the central wall of a *kohbar-ghar* painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989, showing the *kohbar* or the lotus plant motif.

The bride and the bridegroom move to this nuptial chamber. As they enter, the bride is made to take a pinch of vermilion from a plate held by a woman of her family and to put a red mark on the painted motif of the bamboo grove on the wall, the bridegroom making a similar offering to the painted motif of the lotus plant. The ritual of the bride offering vermilion to the male symbol and the groom offering the same to the female one clearly relates to fertility not only in that it represents symbolic union of the male and female but also because the lotus plant and the bamboo trees proliferating in rich abundance, are themselves considered to be charged with growth and fertility. That is also why bamboo leaves are used in several rituals connected with the sacraments of life, and why great significance is attached to the bride being bathed in the lotus pond one night prior to the wedding.

By the time this ritual is completed, it is almost early morning. The bride and the groom retire for a while to the *kohbar-ghar*, and after a few hours

perform *gauri-puja*. A figure of an elephant made from unbaked clay is placed on the floor in front of the central painted wall. On the head of the elephant a silver ring, a piece of wood, and an areca nut are placed, one over the other, and in that order from bottom to top. The bride, wearing an ivory ring around the little fingure of her left hand, squats in front of the elephant, and while pressing *gerli,* a ring made of jute fibre, under her right foot, she takes vermilion powder, pinch by pinch, from a plate and sprinkles it thrice over the installation on the elephant's head. Finally she puts some vermilion in the central parting of her own hair. As she performs this ritual, the bridegroom, standing behind her, holds the hand with which she makes the offering. This ritual of *gauri-puja* is expected to be performed by the bride and the groom in the *kohbar-ghar* in precisely this way every morning as long as the bridegroom stays at the bride's home.

It is interesting to note that customarily the scene of the bride and the groom worshipping Gauri is an integral part of the wall paintings executed on the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar*. Apparently the ritual of *gauri-puja*, as part of the Vedic ritual in Mithila, echoes an ancient practice of *gauri-hara-puja* described in some of the *Dharmashastras*: 'Images of Gauri and Hara are to be made of gold or silver or pictures of them on a wall, etc. or on a piece of cloth or stone are to be drawn and worshipped by the intending bride...'.[34]

The most remarkable feature of the Maithil Kayasth marriage ceremony is the ritual of the consummation of the marriage which takes place inside the *kohbar-ghar*. This is the feature that makes the Maithil Kayasth marriage unique among extant Hindu marriage practices anywhere in northern India and, provides a direct link with the ancient practices of marriage described in the *Dharmashastras*. Among Hindus today, the culmination of marriage is attained with the completion of offering vermilion and the seven steps taken together by the bride and bridegroom round the fire-altar; so much so that if the bridegroom dies at any time after this rite has been performed, the bride is considered to have been widowed. Among the Maithil Kayasths this is not the case. Here, after the rituals of the bridegroom anointing the central parting of the bride's hair with vermilion and circumambulating the *vedi,* the fire-altar, the marriage is solemnised. It is not however considered the culmination, which would occur only after the completion of the additional rituals of consummation comprising *chaturthi.*

Significantly, the ritual takes place entirely in the *kohbar-ghar* whose walls are painted with images, motifs, and symbols indicating the union of the male and the female, denoting fertility, proliferation, and regeneration.

Among the Kayasths of Mithila, it is customary for the bride and the groom to spend three nights following the wedding night together in the *kohbar-ghar*, but without engaging in sexual intercourse. During this period, they are expected to sleep on a *patia*, a grass-mat. According to most informants, to this day, the custom of spending three nights together, but in celibacy, is largely observed. It is however said that the practice is changing and that in some instances another boy and a girl related to the bridal couple spend the three nights in the *kohbar-ghar* with them so that the bridal couple is not afforded the privacy to cohabit. It is reported that

in some cases the bride stays with the bridegroom only for a while in the *kohbar-ghar* and then goes and sleeps in another room. Some married informants of mine have confided that these days strict celibacy is not observed. According to Ganga Devi, in earlier times there was a custom of hanging a cloth, like a curtain, between the bridal pair during these three nights.

On completion of the ritual of 'three nights' begins the ceremony of consummation, *chaturthi* or 'the fourth'. In the early morning, before sunrise, the bridal couple is awakened by relatives of the bride. The morning begins with the ceremonial bath. The water used for this bath is that which was brought in a pitcher from a pond on the night of the wedding and placed on a heap of paddy on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar*.

The paintings which were installed on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar* on the occasion of its consecration, are now wiped out by smearing clay and cowdung, and in their place, new paintings are executed. On this occasion the diagram known as *chaturthi ka aripan* is specially made on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar*. On the fringe of this diagram, the bridal couple is made to sit on a *patia,* grass mat, facing the central painted wall. The *purohita* sits next to them at a right angle. In front of them a ritual fire is lit with mango twigs. *Ghee* is offered to the fire as the *purohita* mutters the sacred hymns. Women sing special songs for the occasion. Amidst this, the bridegroom gets up and, standing behind the bride, unveils her head, places vermilion in the central parting of her hair and replaces the sari covering her head. As the sari is removed from the bride's head, her mother or aunt covers her face.

This is followed by *durgachhat,* offering of *dhan* (paddy), *dhani* (coriander seeds), rice, and *durva* or *dubhi* grass by the *purohita* and four elderly relatives of the bride. These are sprinkled thrice over the groom and once over the bride. Then the *purohita* applies *dahi ka tika,* a yoghurt-mark, on the forehead of the groom. Elderly women perform *chuman* in the course of which each of them takes pinchfuls of some of the mixture of the ingredients (paddy, coriander, etc.) with both their hands and touches them to the feet, knees and shoulders of the bride and the groom in turn, eventually sprinkling them over their heads.[35]

Explaining the significance of the use of yoghurt on this occasion, a male Maithil Kayasth told me that yoghurt was a form of milk and according to a popular proverb of Mithila: *dudho nahao puto phalo*, 'bathe in milk and flourish with sons'.

Similarly, fish is considered auspicious in almost all the sacraments of Mithila, including that of marriage. It features prominently in the wall paintings of the *kohbar-ghar* and in other pictorial contexts. The ceremonial evening meal of *chaturthi* comprises fish received from the house of the bridegroom. The importance of fish on ritual occasions is attributed to its prolific growth and therefore as a symbol of fertility.

The *durgachhat* and *chuman* are followed by *gauri-puja.* After this once again the bride applies a vermilion mark on to the painted motif of *bans*, bamboo grove, and the groom to that of the *purain*, lotus plant.

The bride and groom now spend the night of *chaturthi* together in the *kohbar-ghar*. Traditionally, it is considered obligatory for the couple to consummate their marriage through sexual intercourse this night in the *kohbar-ghar* in the presence of all the deities and sacred symbols of plenty and fertility enshrined in the surrounding wall-paintings.

Once the ritual of *chaturthi* is over, on one of the following days[36] which is suitable, the bride is taken to the groom's house. Here a ritual similar to that of 'three nights' and 'the fourth' known as *bharphori* is performed. On their arrival at the groom's house, the bridal pair is led to the *kohbar-ghar*. The *kohbar* painting here is not as elaborate as that in the bride's house. The bridegroom's *kohbar* has only *sat patta* or 'seven leaves' (medallions), as against fifteen in the bride's *kohbar*. This rudimentary motif is painted here in a single colour, yellow, just a day before the arrival of the bridal couple.

For the first three days the bride is not supposed to move around anywhere outside this room or undertake any household duties. On the morning of the fourth day, after taking a bath, she is allowed to enter the kitchen, only to smear the hearth and the floor around it and to make *thaon*, diagrams in cowdung relief, in the *angan*. That evening she cooks the first meal at her husband's house. After the meal the newly married couple is made to sit in the *angan* where the husband gently hits his wife with a mango branch. The offended bride's mood is restored by the husband's younger brother who extracts a promise from his bridegroom brother to give the bride a gift of her choice.[37]

It is not uncommon in India to find that certain social or ritual practices typical of a particular community are often also prevalent, in varying degrees, in the broader geographical region. Among the Rajputs, Bhumihars, Khatris, and Sunars of the region, a rite known as *chauthari* is also prevalent in which the bridal couple, after reaching the groom's house, spend three nights together in celibacy to consummate the marriage on the fourth night.

From the centrality and elaborateness of the rituals of consummation among the Kayasths of Mithila, one may quite safely assume that when these rituals (which, as we shall see later, had ancient roots), were originally practised, the marriage took place only after the couple had attained puberty, and the observance of *chaturthi*, involving ritually obligatory sexual union, precludes child-marriage. On the other hand, the repetition of the ritual of 'three nights' followed by that of 'the fourth' at the bridegroom's home requires some explanation. Several elderly women informants of mine are of the view that in ancient times the marriageable age of girls was reasonably high (post-puberty), but sometime in the medieval period the custom of child-marriage was introduced. The child bride, after marriage, remained at her parents' home till she attained puberty. The actual ritual of spending three nights together in celibacy and consummation on the fourth night customarily required to be performed only once, whether at the bride's or groom's home. But in the event of the bride and the groom being below the age of puberty, it became necessary to symbolically sanctify the marriage by observing the ritual of *chaturthi* at the bride's home so that the bride or the groom could not get married elsewhere during the long period between

the marriage and attainment of puberty. For these reasons a symbolic *chaturthi* was observed by the child bridal pair to conclude the wedlock, and eventually when the bride attained puberty and came to live with the groom in his home the actual rituals of 'three nights' and 'the fourth' were again performed there.

The present day dual observance of the rituals, first in the *kohbar-ghar* at the bride's home, and then at the groom's can only be explained in terms of the repetition of an archetype in a culture even when it has lost its functional relevance.[38] Moreover, though the practice of adult marriage is becoming increasingly common among the Kayasths of Mithila today, the memory of earlier custom of child-marriage (prevalent till recently and still occasionally taking place) and the dual observance of *chaturthi* may be seen as confusion in the process of tradition adapting to change.

Mithila is one of those isolated pockets of India where ancient beliefs and practices have survived relatively unchanged over the centuries. Almost all the *samskaras*, sacraments of life, from conception and birth to death and post-mortem rites, are fully observed in Mithila, replete with all the intricacies prescribed in the *Dharmashastras*. Interestingly, the authors of the *Dharmashastras* themselves were not only aware of the observance of unusual local customs relating to marriage and other *samskaras*, but had prescribed that: 'people should understand from women and others what procedure is (to be observed according to custom)'.[39] In line with this, there is, in Mithila a noticeable natural intertwining of canonical prescriptions and customary local practice.

The rituals of 'three nights' and those of 'the fourth' prevalent in Mithila have scarcely any parallel in the extant rituals of marriage in other parts of India, and appear to echo the *triratrivrata* and *chaturthikarma* rituals of the *Dharmashastras*;[40] even the term *chaturthi*, used by the Maithil Kayasths is related to *chaturthikarma* of the *Dharmashastras*.

According to the *Paraskara Grihya-Sutra* 'the married pair should [after marriage] not partake of *ksara* and *lavana* [sourness and salt] for three nights, should sleep on the ground (and not on a cot for the same period), and should not have intercourse for a year, twelve nights, six nights, three nights in the last resort'.[41] These scriptural prescriptions are observed in Mithila as a part of their living practices.

With regard to *chaturthikarma*, the *Sankhayana Grihya-Sutra* says:

> Three nights after marriage having elapsed, on the fourth the husband makes into fire eight offerings of cooked food to Agni, Vayu, Surya,... then he pounds the root of Adhyanda plant and sprinkles it into the wife's nostril... he should then touch her, when about to cohabit... then he should murmur...' may a male embryo enter thine womb as an arrow into the quiver; may a man be born here, a son, after ten months'.[42]

The comparable living ritual of *chaturthi*, as practised in Mithila, leading to consummation of the marriage by sexual union clearly echoes the practice set out in the *Dharmashastras*, providing sufficient ground for us to believe that the living practices of Maithil Kayasths are of ancient origin.

Wall-Paintings of the *Kohbar-ghar*

A description of the elaborate marriage rites of the Maithil Kayasths has been provided to create a perspective of the rituals in which the wall-paintings of the *kohbar-ghar* need to be seen. These paintings are highly mystical and symbolic. As we shall see when exploring the meaning and significance of the symbols and images of these wall-paintings, they appear to be isolated iconographic elements and yet have meaning in the composite context of beliefs and practices.

How old is the practice of painting the walls of nuptial chambers in Mithila? In ancient Indian literature there seems to be no specific reference to paintings done on the walls of what might be the equivalent of a *kohbar-ghar*. However, a *Dharmashastra* which mentions that *gauri-hara-puja* (the worship of Shiva and his consort Gauri), is to be performed by the bride as part of the wedding ritual, has an oblique reference to a certain painting which might have a counterpart in the present-day *kohbar* paintings:

> Images of Gauri and Hara are to be made of gold or silver or pictures of them on a wall, etc. or on a piece of cloth or stone are to be drawn and worshipped by the intending bride after *punyahvachana* and before *kanyadan*.[43]

The above reference in *Laghu-Asvalayana* goes back to the second century. Since in Mithila the painted depiction of *gauri-puja* is an important element of the general scheme of *kohbar* wall-paintings and the fact that *gauri-puja* is repeatedly performed in *kohbar-ghar*, there is sufficient ground to believe that at least as early as the age of the *Laghu-Asvalyana*, the worship of Gauri in her pictorial form prevailed as part of the wedding ritual, and that in all probability the current practice in Mithila reflects this ancient tradition. However, this singular and limited reference tells us nothing about the tradition of installing a nuptial chamber or its wall-paintings.

Among the Brahmins of Mithila, and generally among the Hindus of eastern Uttar Pradesh, there is a custom of imprinting on a wall, in the course of a wedding, multiple impressions of a palm dipped in rice paste. The custom of imprinting impressions of a palm dipped in rice paste, vermilion or cowdung on various ritual occasions is found in many parts of India, including some very remote tribal areas. All three ingredients, i.e. rice, vermilion, and cowdung, are associated with auspiciousness and fertility. In all probability, the earliest form of *kohbar* comprised simple impressions of the palm, and it was only later that elaborate paintings were executed in the *kohbar-ghar*.

Looking at some of the images painted on the main wall of the *kohbar-ghar,* it would appear that in reality these are painted illustrations of actual objects considered sacred in the context of the sacrament of marriage, such as the lotus plant, bamboo grove, mat, earthen pot, earthen lamp, fish, the sun and moon, the branch of a *bel* tree, etc. There are also painted illustrations of certain Hindu myths, such as those of Shiva and Parvati, rituals of *gauri puja*, and magical phenomena such as *naina-jogin*, etc. It is very likely that earlier, a certain set of sacred objects were installed in the *kohbar-ghar*,

and eventually some of them found a place in the painting. The process of transition of actual objects being replaced by painted images can still be seen in a few surviving examples where both the actual objects and their corresponding painted images exist in the *kohbar-ghar*. For instance, though the painted terracotta *purhar*, pitcher, and *patil*, lamp, are placed on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar*, their painted images are a part of the *kohbar* painting too. As described earlier, though the bridegroom ritually circumambulates the *kohbar-ghar* to have a dialogue, charged with magical implications, with women standing in the four corners dressed up as *naina-jogins*, the latter's images are nevertheless painted on the walls in the corresponding four corners. Similarly, despite the custom of hanging an actual branch of the *bel* tree in the *kohbar-ghar*, from which the bridegroom plucks leaves to give to the bride for use in *gauri-puja*, a branch of the *bel* tree is painted among the symbols and sacred images on the central wall of *kohbar-ghar*.

The very fact that, apart from the painted motif of *kohbar*, or the central lotus plant and *bans*, the bamboo grove, none of the symbols and images of the wall-painting are separately venerated, it becomes obvious that the basic and most essential part of the paintings of the *kohbar-ghar* amongst the Kayasths of Mithila, were these two motifs alone, and that other secondary images were subsequently added at the will and fancy of the artists. That is also why, although there is no variation from one house to another with regard to the inclusion of the motifs of the lotus plant and bamboo grove in the sacred painting of *kohbar-ghar*, the number and position of the rest of the motifs constantly vary. Even though the scene of *gauri-puja* is painted on the central *kohbar* wall, the actual *puja* is performed over the three-dimensional clay elephants and other installations in front of the painting, rendering the painted scene somewhat superficial, at least ritually.

The Painters and the Process of Painting

The paintings in the *kohbar-ghar* and those on the outer walls flanking the entrance to it, the wall-paintings of the *gosain-ghar*, those related to the Durgashtami festival, and the *aripan* floor paintings, are all the work of women. These paintings centre around the calendar of annual ritual events and important sacraments such as birth, tonsure, or wedding. Though the act of painting is a collective endeavour of the women of the extended family and those from neighbouring households, its pictorial conception, drawing, iconographic features and, to some extent, the stylistic aspects, are governed by a single woman known to be a distinguished painter, who is informally appointed as the leading painter and co-ordinator.

After consulting a *purohita*, an auspicious day and time are identified to begin work on a painting. The main wall of the *kohbar-ghar*, which faces east, is white-washed, and then covered with rice paste applied by a cloth dipped in the paste. The very act of smearing the wall with rice paste is an important ritual event, transforming a mere domestic wall into a sacred space in the same way as an ordinary floor acquires magical properties, necessary for sacred installations to be placed upon it, through *aripan* diagrams executed with rice paste.

After the main wall of the *kohbar-ghar* is thus sanctified, an auspicious beginning to the painting is done by *tip lagavaichi* or putting a red dot at the centre of the wall, which also serves as the mid-point of the central medallion of the central lotus plant motif. This ceremony may be performed only by an *ahibati,* a married woman whose husband is still alive. Usually the leading painter herself performs this ritual act, but in the event of her being a widow, the task of *tip lagavaichi* is performed by a married woman. On this occasion, five women of the family sing *ele subh ke lagan subhe ho subhe*, 'let there be all round auspiciousness in the auspicious wedding'.

Because of the ritual requirement of starting the *kohbar* painting from its centre (as also *aripan* floor paintings), the women painters of Mithila have developed a general habit of working out the entire space of their painting in relation to its centre. This is an extremely important determinant of style and composition in Mithila painting, and deserves elaboration.

The construction of the motifs of the *kohbar*, *kamaldah*, *bans*, and *aripan* (all basically variations of the lotus motif) is essentially centrifugal. Before the drawing of any of these is begun, the centre is identified and a dot is placed there. Growing outward from this dot, the entire motif spreads to the periphery of the space. As explained by Ganga Devi, the central dot, *tip,* is like the kernel from which the lotus plant sprouts and gradually proliferates, to finally take over the entire pond. It is perhaps this image of the germination and growth of the lotus pond from the central kern that governs the pictorial normalisation of the motif, leading to a dense growth of buds, a range of half open to fully bloomed flowers, intertwined stems, leaves, fruit, weeds combined with ripples of water, underwater life, bees, and birds – filling up the entire space of the painting, because emptiness would be tantamount to infecundity.

It is important to note here that the paintings of the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar* are in the nature of a loose juxtaposition of symbolic images in contrast with those of the side walls, and the outer side of *kohbar-ghar*, flanking the entrance to it, which represent scenes of Mahadev (Shiva) and Parvati, Krishna and Radha, Krishna with cowherdesses, etc., all narrative in character. It is this distinctive pictorial scheme of symbolic and narrative painting as it traditionally existed among the Kayasths of Mithila that was responsible for the later development of narrative painting here with the large-scale introduction of paper. As we shall see in the following chapters, individual artists like Ganga Devi derived much from this composite symbolic-narrative tradition, and made highly innovative and poetic use of this heritage of theirs in their contemporary work.

Traditionally, the women of Mithila used pigments derived from natural substances: vermilion powder mixed with mustard seed and ground on a mill stone gave a bright red, a mixture of cowdung and lamp-black combined with goats' milk produced greenish black. *Pevdi*, a mineral, was used for lemon yellow and turmeric for yellow ochre. Indigo and *geru*, red clay, mixed with gum arabica or goats' milk provided blue and Indian red, respectively. As mentioned earlier, rice paste was used for white.

As early as the 1940s or even earlier, the Mithila painters had begun to use

Previous page
Detail of sacred imagery to be depicted on one of the side walls of an ideal Kayasth *kohbar-ghar*; painted by Ganga Devi at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, 1989; The images depicted here include (from left to right) *naina-jogin*; Parvati, the bride, receiving Shiva, the bridegroom; Krishna playing his flute under a *Kadamba* tree.

chemical pigments commercially available in the local markets, sourced from Calcutta.[44] These 'powder colours', as they are popularly known, are mixed with milk to prepare wet pigment for wall-paintings (milk-fat acting as a binding material and providing, to some extent, a waterproof quality), with gum arabica being used for painting on paper, respectively. However, in some families, powders mixed with gum arabica (nowadays replaced by Fevicol, a synthetic adhesive) are also used for wall-painting.

Home-made brushes – a thin bamboo twig for drawing the outline and a thicker one with a piece of rag tied at one end to fill up larger areas with pigment – are used to this day.

The Iconographic Motifs and their Pictorial Conceptualisation

Kohbar

There seems to be great confusion among scholars about the interpretation of this motif. Most scholars have described it as the lotus motif or 'lotus ring' motif, pierced by a bamboo shaft representing sexual union of the male and female or the bride and the bridegroom.[45] In reality, this symbol neither represents the lotus flower, nor 'lotus ring', nor sexual union of any kind. It primarily represents the lotus plant, with its *jar-muri* or roots and stem from which leaves (normally 15 among the Maithil Kayasths) grow in various directions. The floral medallions, that surround the central stem, like a ring, are not lotus flowers but *pat* or leaves. On account of their floral form, many scholars have mistaken the lotus leaves for flowers. Similarly, the central vertical stem cutting across the ring of lotus leaves is not meant to be a bamboo shaft but the 'stem and roots' of the lotus plant. The word *purain*, which denotes lotus leaves, is often used as a synonym for the *kohbar* motif and it is the leaves rather than the flowers that signify rapid proliferation. The word *kamal* rather than *purain* is commonly used for the lotus flower in Mithila. For example, in the case of the lotus pond motif, the word used is *kamaldah*. The word *barri* is used for the fruit. These three elements of lotus plants are clearly distinguished by the Maithils in their belief and iconography.

The entire *kohbar* motif, with its roots, stem, and proliferating leaves, is the symbol of the bride or the female but is not, as some scholars have it, her *yoni* or sexual organ.[46] Many women painters paint a female face at the upper end of the central stem, clearly indicating that the lotus plant motif is the personification of the bride. Further proof of this belief is the ritual of offering *sindur* to the painted motif of the *kohbar* by the bridegroom, which is obviously a symbolic repetition of the act of offering vermilion in the central parting of the hair of the bride as part of the ceremony of solemnisation of marriage, which has been described at length earlier.

As mentioned above, in the depiction of the *kohbar* or the lotus plant motif, the women of Mithila often endeavoured to personify the motif as the bride. It has also been observed earlier that the importance of the lotus plant and lotus pond in Mithila stems from its abundant growth. In this context, it may be pointed out here that the Hindu goddess of good fortune, prosperity, and fertility is known as Kamala, 'the one who dwells in the lotus'. Interestingly, one of her appellations is Lakshmi, literally meaning

'She-of-the Hundred-Thousands', which has a direct bearing on the abundant proliferation of fertility. In the *Rigveda*, the goddess is described as Karisini or 'the one possessing dung', for 'she is the patroness of the rice-growing agriculture of native India, where rice is planted in the mud and cultivated with inundated fields. She is the goddess of the fertility of the soil...'.[47]

In the pictorial depiction of the *kohbar* motif, the most essential iconographic features include the central vertical stem with a broad base and a pointed pinnacle, the latter being either in the form of a female face (the bride) or a lotus bud. The stem itself is shown studded with lotus flower ornamentation or other decorative patterning. Cutting across the centre of the stem is the central lotus leaf medallion, which is usually surrounded by six similar medallions forming a ring. Eight other small medallions are painted in the interstices between the central and the surrounding ones. The remaining spaces within and around the ring are filled with a network of stalks issuing out of the base and symmetrically spreading in all directions, interconnecting the medallions, the innumerable lotus flowers, buds, calyxes and weeds, like umbilical cords. The rim of the entire plant, which itself resembles one large medallion, is usually shown dotted with a row of parrots or bees. Occasionally a pair or two of fish or snakes are drawn in the space within or around the plant.

Left
Goddess Shri rising out of a lotus, carved relief panel in stone, Stupa-II, Sanchi, c. 2nd century BC. Photo: Courtesy Archaeological Survey of India, New Delhi.

Right
Purna-kalasha, 'fill-vase' showing lotus plant motif, carved relief panel in stone, Stupa-II, Sanchi, c. 2nd century BC. Photo: Courtsey Archaelogical Survey of India, New Delhi.

It should be noted here that there is an astonishing similarity of concept and form between the so-called lotus medallions and the *purna-kalasha* panels of the celebrated Buddhist stupas of Sanchi and the *kohbar* motif of Mithila. Both represent lotus plant motifs signifying fertility and auspiciousness; occasionally in Sanchi the lotus plant is shown personified as Shri Lakshmi, the goddess of beauty and plenty, surrounded by lotus leaves, flowers, buds, and fruit but in Mithila the same plant (*kohbar*) is personified as the bride desirous of the qualities personified by the goddess Shri. In the upper portion of a ground balustrade of the railing of Stupa No. 2 at Sanchi, there is an interesting depiction of the goddess Shri. Her slender standing figure rises out of the central lotus, the stem of which in turn grows from its roots along with those of other surrounding lotuses and leaves. In this particular case the central stem of the lotus plant has been converted into the anthropomorphic figure of the goddess Shri in her standing posture. This depiction comes closest to the *kohbar* motif shown on page 56, in which the central stem has been converted into the figure of a bride by painting a female face at the top. Extremely ornate and stylised lotus flowers, calyxes, buds, leaves, and fruit rising out of a pot (in Sanchi) or roots, (*jar* in Mithila), forming a ring around the central stem or stalks, found both in Sanchi and Mithila, probably speak of the survival of an ancient tradition in the comparatively isolated society of today's Mithila.

The *kamaldah* or the lotus pond motif of Mithila, with a large central lotus medallion symmetrically surrounded by smaller lotuses, buds, leaves, and underwater life such as fish, crabs, and tortoise, comes very close, in pictorial rendering, to the lotus medallions of Sanchi, the latter too having comparable forms and imagery.

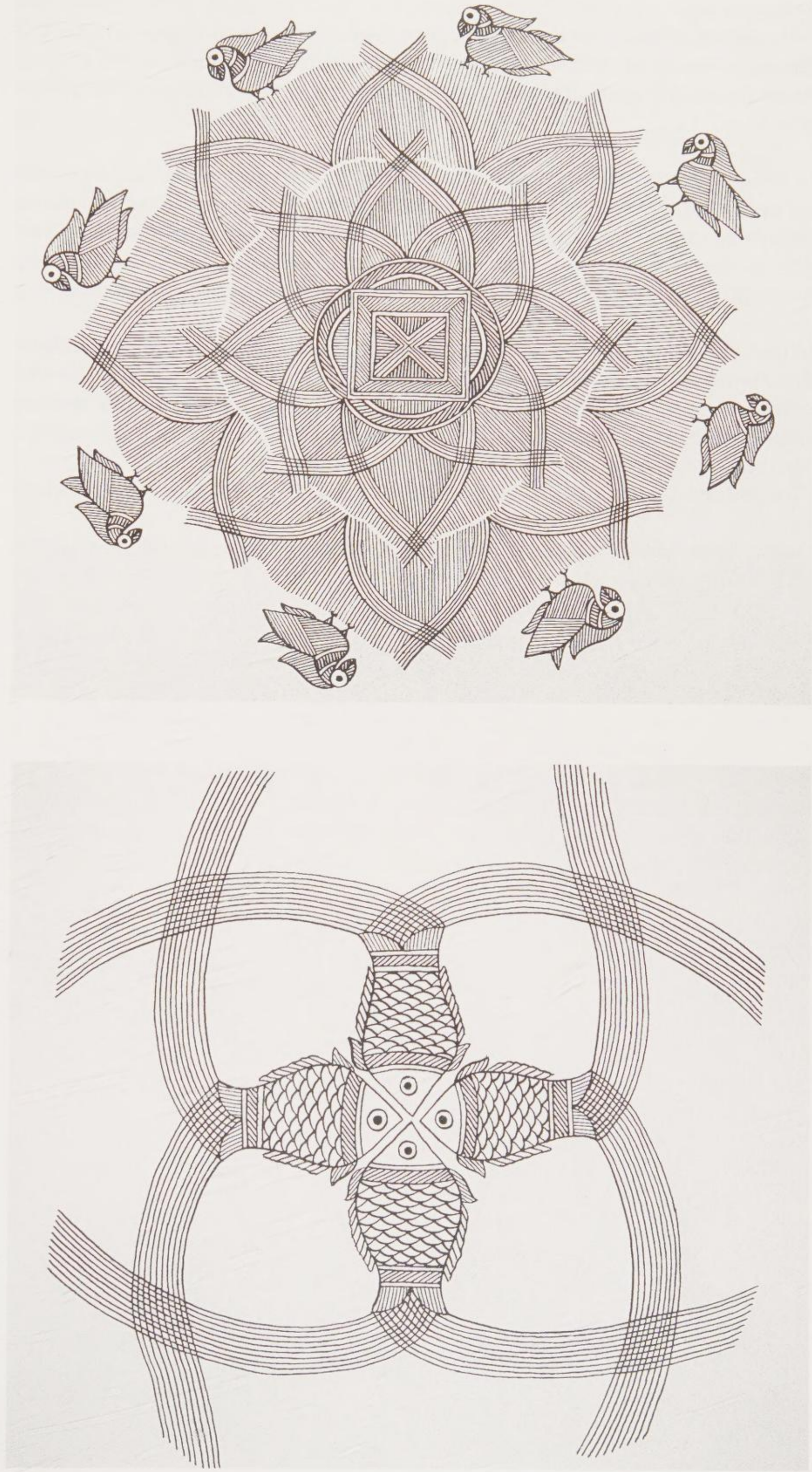
Bans

Bans is the bamboo grove motif, metaphorically representing the bridegroom, the symbolic male counterpart of the female motif of *kohbar*. As the lotus plant motif represents female fertility, the bamboo grove motif epitomises the male regenerative energy, though not the male sexual organ as some writers suggest.[48] The bamboo plant, which has a masculine gender in Maithili, multiplies and spreads rapidly and has therefore become associated with male fertility. As has been noted earlier, at the time the ritual offering of vermilion is made in the *kohbar-ghar*, the bride offers it to the painted symbol of a bamboo grove and the groom to that of the lotus plant.

The women of Mithila have shown a remarkable talent in abstract pictorialisation of this particular motif. The motifs of the lotus plant – entwined birds, fish, tortoise, scorpion, or any other that occurs in the *kohbar* – may be stylised or simplified to a certain degree but their overall rendering is such that each is recognisable as an abstracted image of what it represents. Interestingly, this is not the case with the painted image of the bamboo grove as it occurs on the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar*. In this particular instance, the abstraction is so complete that the painted image acquires the character of a graphic symbol, not only acting as the 'analogue for certain areas of visual experience'[49] but adopting the nature of a mystical diagram, on the one hand imbued with an utter simplicity of outer form and, on the other, still revealing 'unconfigurated ambiguities'[50] and all those things 'which fully form the context of experience'.[51]

A hazy and dreamy impression of an ocean of small, pointed green leaves quivering in the smooth flow of summer breezes whistling through a dense bamboo grove perhaps provides the basis for the pictorialisation of this motif. Innumerable fibrous lines – intertwined, staggered or parallel – capture the spirit of a dense, rapidly spreading bamboo grove. These fibrous masses are organised into diagrammatic motifs which then adopt the forms of a lotus medallion, a tree medallion, or a fish medallion – often incorporating in its conception, symmetrically arranged images of elephants, parrots, peacocks, or fish in amorous pairs.

I have selected two of Ganga Devi's line drawings representing *kamal par ke bans*, bamboo grove motif in lotus form, and *machh par ke bans*, bamboo grove motif in fish form, to illustrate and elaborate the points made above.



Bans, bamboo grove motif as variably conceptualised by Ganga Devi, 1988-89, ink on paper, 22 cm x 17 cm; private collection.

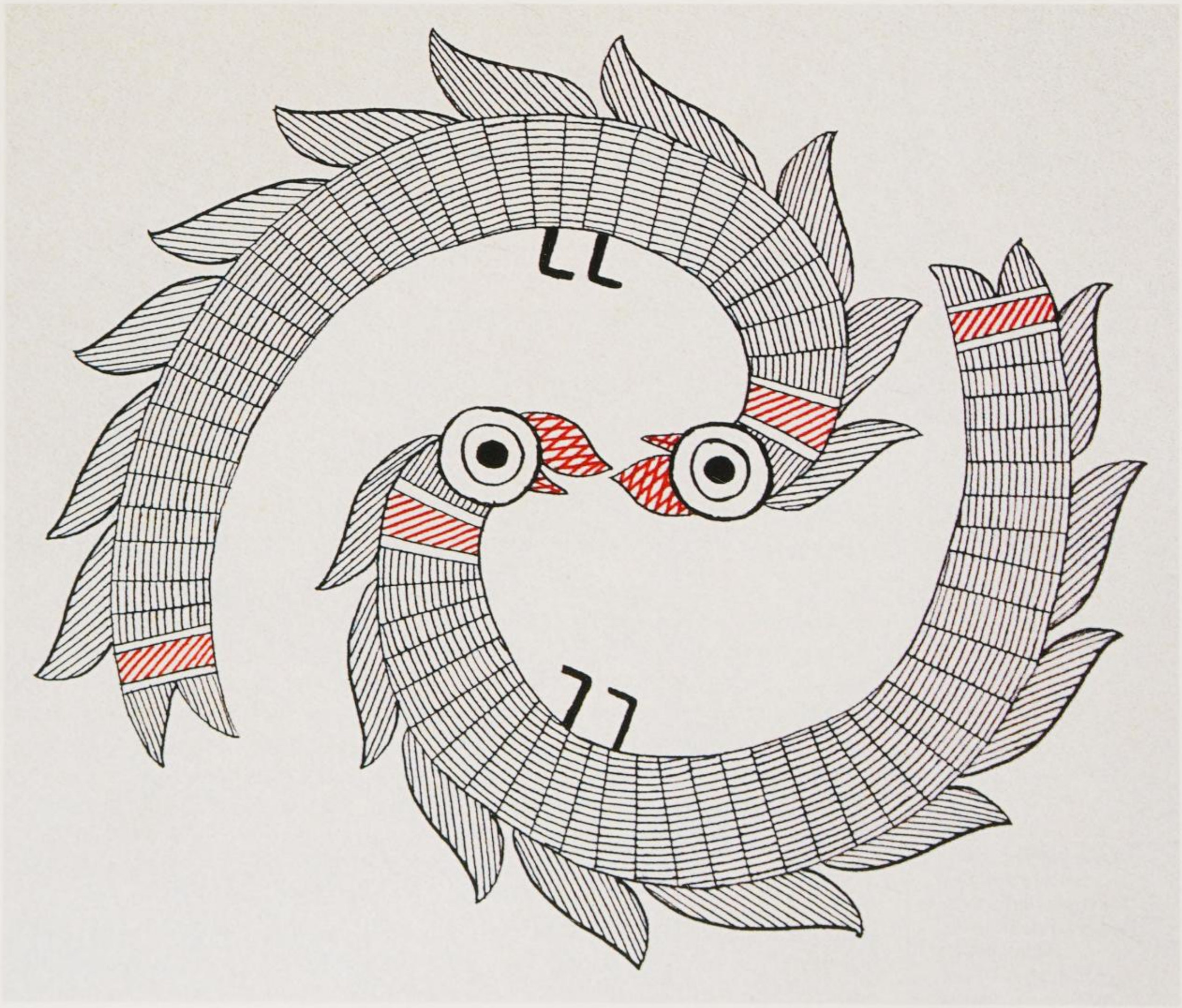
Latpatia suga

Literally, 'parrots in union', this motif of two parrots flying in circles, chasing one another in erotic play is painted in virtually every elaborate Kayasth *kohbar-ghar*. The motif represents the union of the bride and the groom.

In the *Dharmashastras*, as also in Sanskrit love poetry, one finds repeated references to *chakravaka* birds (Anas Cassarca) who are supposed to be separated and to mourn during the night. It is interesting to note here that the name *chakravaka* owes its origin to the 'a-oung' call of the bird, resembling the sound of a rusted wheel mounted on a wooden axle.[52]

In the context of the ceremony of marital consummation, one of the *Grihya-Sutras* cites the following mantra: 'The concord that belongs to the *chakravaka* birds, that is brought out of the rivers of which divine Gandharvas is possessed, thereby are concordant'.[53]

This reference in Sanskrit literature makes it evident that the union of



Latpatia suga, entwined parrots motif; Ganga Devi, 1988-89, ink on paper, 22 cm x 17 cm; private collection.

man and woman is symbolised by that of two birds, and the occurrence of the painted motif of *latpatia suga*, two parrots flying in circles engaged in erotic play, on the wall of nuptial chamber where marriage is consummated, further testifies to the continuity of symbols and motifs from the past, cutting across cultural strata.

The pictorial rendering differs to a degree from artist to artist. Usually, to attain the circular movement of the birds, the body of each one is elongated and curved to form a semicircle. Disproportionately small wings are shown issuing from the bodies in order not to dissipate the sense of concentric movement.

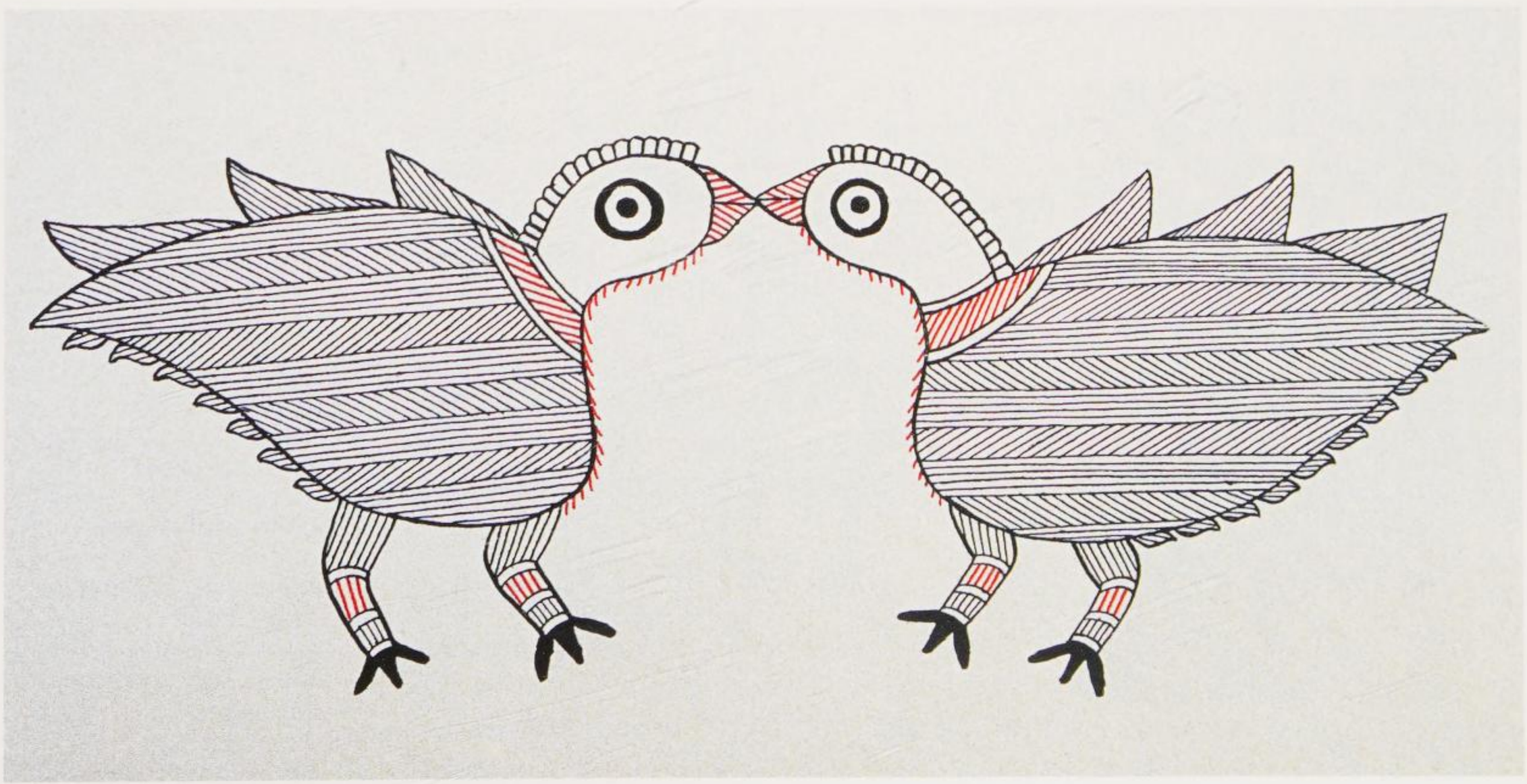
Bidh-bidhata

This motif comprising two birds symmetrically facing each other in a beak to beak union, is usually painted above the central lotus plant, almost like a pinnacle. This placement is most appropriate for this divine pair because it presides over the well-being and future destiny of the newly married couple.

In popular Mithila belief, *bidh* and *bidhata* are female and male birds, respectively. They govern the course of events of every individual's life. When there is a death in a family, a neighbour is often heard saying: 'No wonder, this unfortunate event has taken place, last night I saw *bidh-bidhata* hovering over the house of the deceased.'

Bidhata is believed to record in written form an account of an individual's entire future life on the occasion of an infants' sixth day rite *chhatthi* or initiation of an infant described in *The Cycle of Life*. On this later day an anthropomorphic cowdung image of *bidhata*, with a reed pen along side, is placed in this form of a cloth bundle, next to the infant being initiated, with a request that *bidhata* write a happy course of its future destiny.

Bidh-bidhata, the birds governing the destiny of an individual; Ganga Devi, 1988-89, ink on paper, 22 cm x 17 cm; private collection.



The pictorial image of *bidh-bidhata*, as it appears in the wall-paintings of the nuptial chamber of the Kayasths of Mithila, comprises two birds facing each other with conjoined beaks and fanning tails, not so much representing identifiable birds, as imaginary, mythological ones.

Patia

Patia is a thick reed mat woven from *mothi*, a fast multiplying reed that grows wild in the ponds and ditches of Mithila.

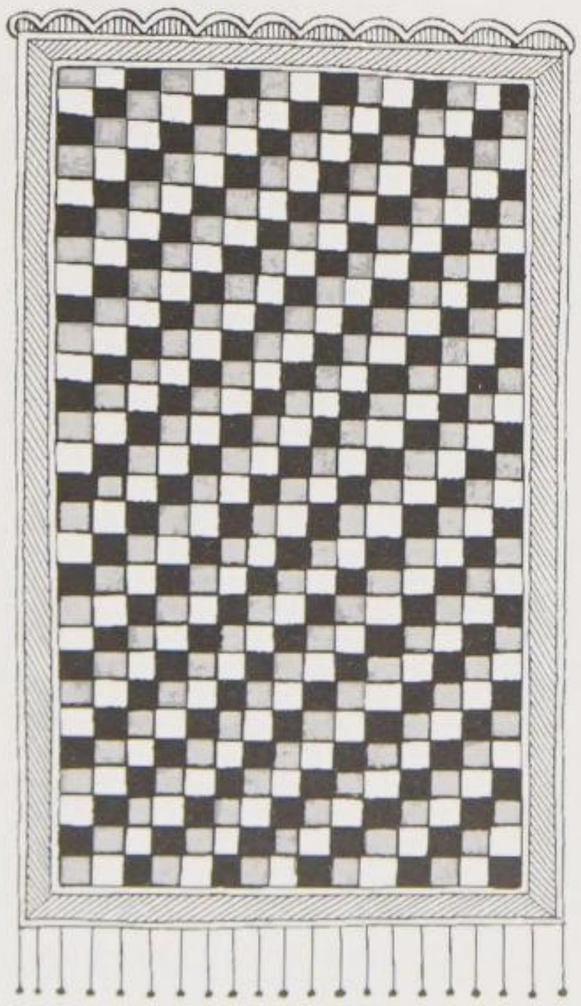
On the occasion of *chaturthi,* consummation, the bride and the bridegroom spend the night on a *patia*, which is subsequently taken by the bride to her husband's house as part of her dowry, and there used again by her for sleeping on during the initial period of three to four days.

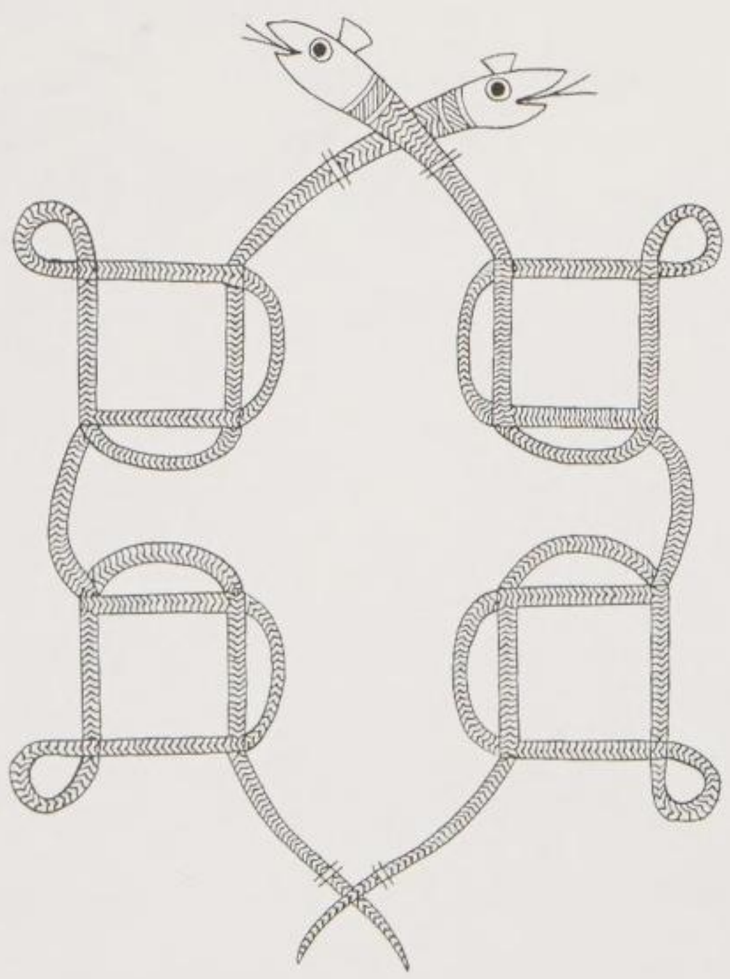
In *kohbar* painting, the *patia* is usually shown as a rectangular mat with a chequer-board pattern.

Nag-nagin

This symbol of entwined male and female cobras is representative of the union of the bride and the groom.[54]

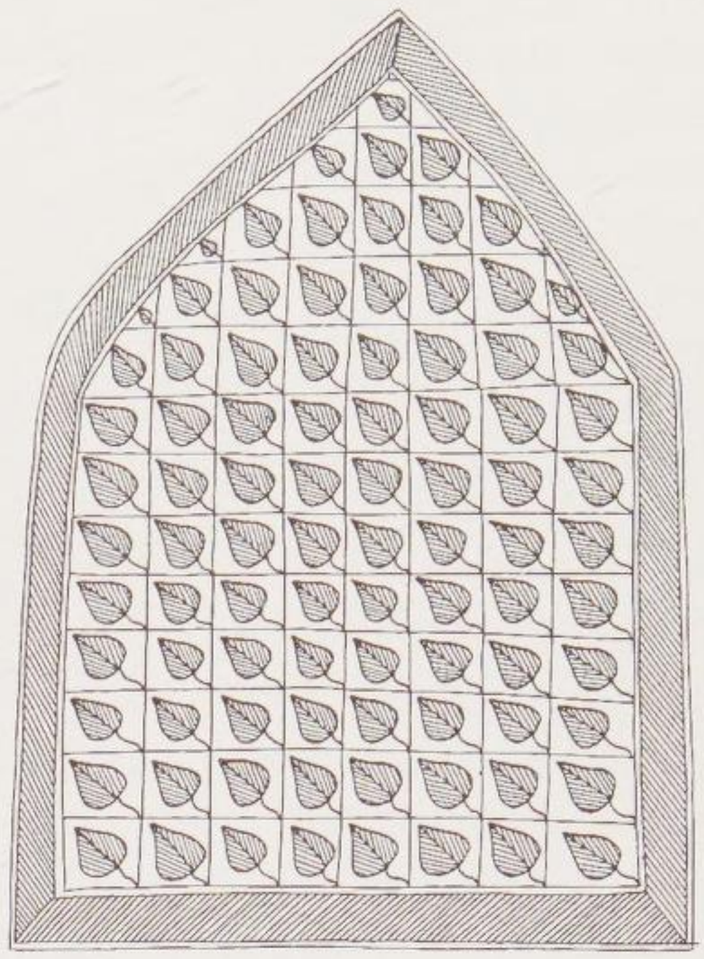
There are various modes of representation of this motif which often adopt the forms of geometric diagrams. *Sarpabandha*, or the diagrammatic composition of entwined snakes, features almost throughout India in the painting and relief sculpture tradition. Depiction of the Jaina *tirthankara* Parshvanatha surrounded by a 'thousand-hooded snake', (*sahasraphana* Parshvanatha*)*; and that of Krishna quelling the snake Kaliya as it appears in carved and painted relief panels, or prevalence of the motif of entwined snakes in the South Indian floor-paintings, *kolam,* or in the Mithila wall-paintings, apparently presupposes an ancient labyrinthine diagram that has been modified and adapted to suit the iconography of snake related cultic images in various parts of India.





Left
Patia, floor mat;
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
22 cm x 17 cm;
private collection.

Left and opposite page left
Nag-Nagin,
male and female cobra;
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
22 cm x 17 cm,
private collection.



Right
Pan ke ghar,
betel-leaf house;
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
22 cm x 17 cm;
private collection.

Pan ke ghar

Literally 'leaf house', the motif represents a bamboo structure covered with betel leaf creepers. These creepers are cultivated near a pond inside a grass thatched hut with a gabled roof. Betel leaf is considered auspicious throughout northern India.

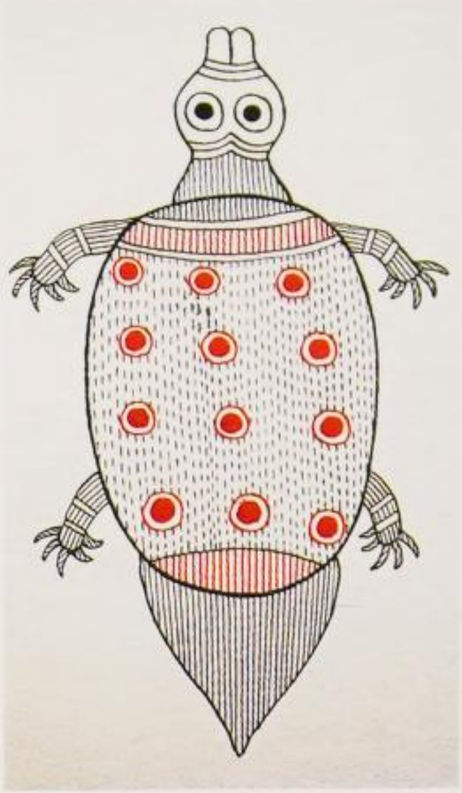
In the pictorial rendering of the *kohbar* wall, the motif is stylised so as to represent, in outline, the grass thatched hut divided into multiple squares – each with a betel leaf placed inside it.

Naina jogin

As mentioned earlier, *naina-jogin* is a goddess possessed with magical powers that guards against the evil eye. Her figures are customarily painted in the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar*, where an elaborate ritual is conducted to ward off the evil eye.

Despite minor variations in this iconography, *naina-jogin* is customarily shown frontally as a woman standing, with long loose hair and carrying a basket on her head. The basket containing paddy and pieces of dried turmeric roots is usually held in position by one or both raised hands. The most striking feature of the depiction is the traditional style of covering the entire head and the face, leaving exposed only one eye and part of the left half of the face. Often the partial opening of the veil assumes the form of a triangle, at the centre of which one prominent, wide open eye is seen staring at the onlooker. In some cases, a scorpion motif is painted on the veil and the blouse of the goddess.

The pictorial conceptualisation of the figures of *naina-jogin* placed in the four corners of the nuptial chamber, staring intensely through the triangular opening of her veil at the bridal pair, as if casting a spell on the evil spirits, and at the same time carrying auspicious rice and turmeric root in the basket over her head, adds to the atmosphere of magic and mystery in a chamber where the consummation of marriage occurs.



Top
Tortoise;
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
22 cm x 17 cm;
private collection.

Left
Naina-jogin;
Ganga Devi, 1988-89;
ink on paper,
22 cm x 17 cm;
private collection.

Aripan, Floor Paintings

The life of most Kayasth women of Mithila centres around the *panchanga*, the traditional lunar calendar of the region comprising twelve months, each of 30 days. The month, divided into two halves, each culminating in the full moon and the new moon, respectively, was the basic unit of the annual ritual cycle. Two months constituted a season. The year had six seasons. The ritual significance of each day, on account of the position of the moon, the movement of the sun and the planets, the cycle of seasons and the religious festivals, was described in minute detail in the *panchanga* calendar.

The women of Mithila kept *vratas,* vows and observed fasts on some of these ritually important days. Every lunar month had at least one sacred day on which *aripan*, women's ritual floor paintings, were executed, using rice paste as pigment and a twig as a brush. Specific floor paintings were also undertaken to mark important events in human life, such as puberty, conception, sixth day rites after birth, a child's tonsure ceremony, initiation into learning, betrothal, marriage, etc., and important days of the annual calendar.

The Maithili word *aripan* stems from the Sanskrit *alepana* which derives from the root *lip*, meaning to 'smear', and therefore basically refers to smearing the ground with cowdung and clay for ritual purification and consecration of space, as prescribed in most ancient ritual handbooks, and as still practised by a large number of village and tribal communities.

Aripan are mostly in the nature of semi-geometric floral diagrams. Each diagram has a well-defined centre on which an installation of a sacred pot, a plate, a basket, or a seat is made for ritual purposes.

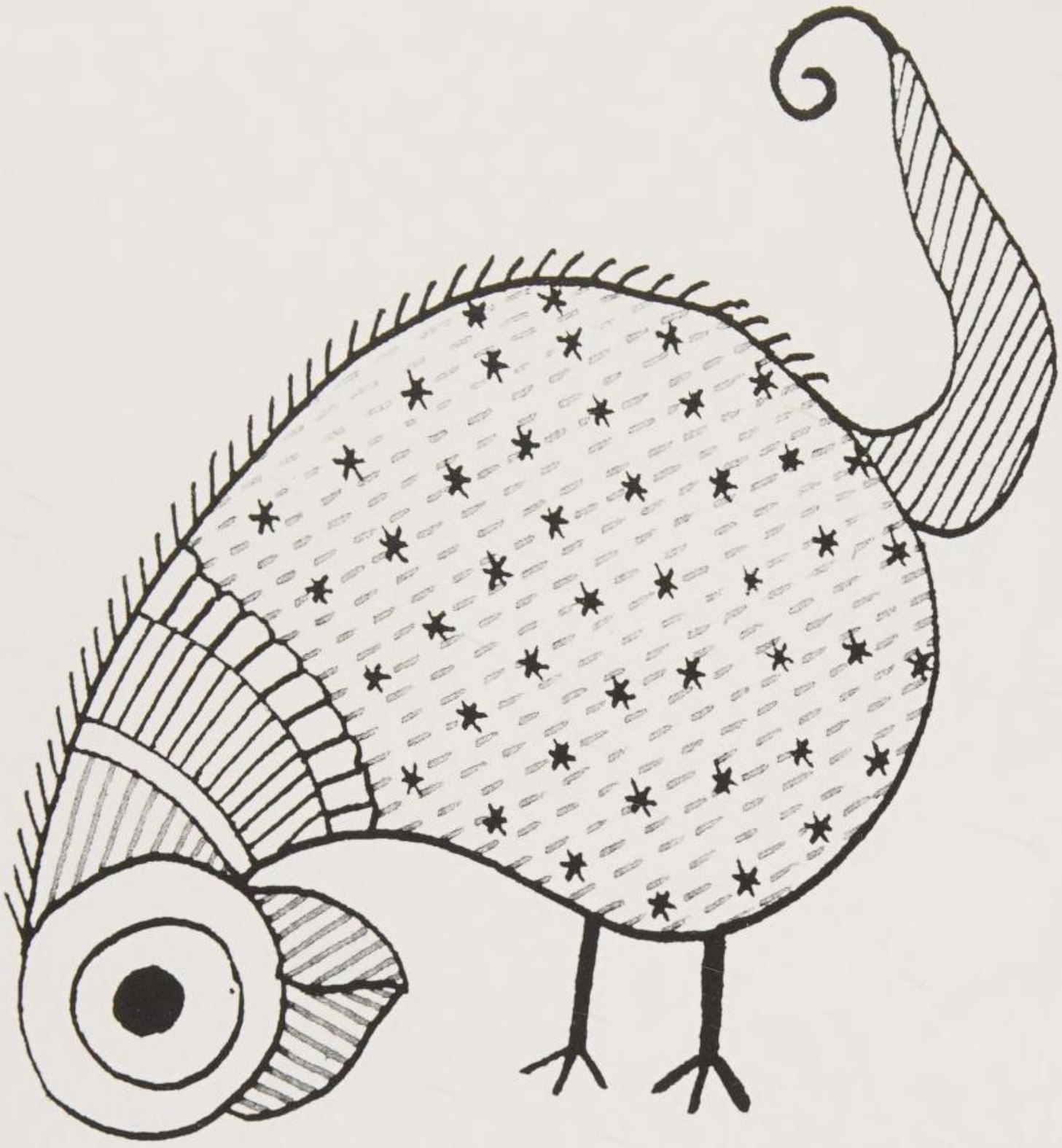
The intricately patterned diagrams are dotted with vermilion at specific points. Most of these are in the form of a lotus flower or plant. Speedy execution and mechanical repetition of traditional forms, combined with an almost mathematical purity of drawing, lend a stylistic certitude and a magical connotation to the *aripan*.

Gosain-ghar and Durgashtami Paintings

The wall-paintings of the *kohbar-ghar* fall into two distinct categories, namely the symbolic images painted on the central wall and the iconographic and narrative paintings executed on the side walls. Of these, the symbolic ones seem to have a formal and cultic affinity with *aripan* diagrams and the iconographic and narrative type with the paintings of the *gosain-ghar* and those done on the occasion of Durgashtami, the 'Eighth of Durga' festival.

Gosain-ghar is the shrine of the *kula-devata*, the family deity, situated in one corner of the kitchen. A newly-built house or a kitchen cannot be used until a shrine is dedicated to the *kula-devata*. A miniature mound of clay, collected from the Ganges, is installed on the floor of the shrine to represent the family deity which is invoked and consecrated by a *pandit*, the officiating priest. The surrounding walls are often adorned with painted images of Rama, Lakshmana, Ganesha, Shiva, Durga. The entrance to the

सीतादेवी



house as a whole and in particular to the kitchen (which is the shrine of the *kula-devata*) is considered sacred, probably because it forms the line of demarcation from profane to sacred space. On the occasion of marriage or any other important social or religious festival, the walls flanking the doors are adorned with religious paintings.[55] On Durgashtami[56] the mud-walls flanking the entrance to the kitchen are smeared with rice paste on which images of Durga astride a lion or a tiger are painted in red clay by the women of the family. In some cases only a circular or a triangular female head is depicted. If the women of the house are not enthusiastic about these painted installations of the goddess, one of them imprints on the mud-walls five impressions of her palm dipped in rice paste on Durgashtami.

Previous page
Durgashtami wall-painting showing the goddess Durga riding her lion or tiger vehicle and attacking the demon Mahishasura;
Sita Devi of Jitwarpur, Madhubani, 1982-83.

Top
Wasp; Ganga Devi, 1988-89, ink on paper, 22 cm x 17 cm; private collection.

The Stories of Rama

Transition from the Symbolic to the Narrative

Illustrating the Story of Rama

While the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar* comprised painted motifs and symbols, each complete in itself, and placed next to each other in loose juxtaposition, the side walls of the nuptial chamber usually had scenes of Shiva's marriage, and those of *lila*, the love-play of Krishna, which were narrative in character. Narrative paintings based on Hindu mythological themes were also done on the outer walls of the house as well as in and around the *gosain-ghar*, the chamber of the family deity.

With the freedom of expression gained through the widespread introduction of paper, the women painters of Mithila were drawn to illustrating scenes from the mythology of Rama, Krishna, Shiva, and the goddess Durga. Ganga Devi was no exception to this.

Between 1973 and 1983 Ganga Devi completed a series of paintings depicting episodes from the story of Rama. As a devotee of Rama, she was well acquainted with the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the *Ramacharitamanasa* of Tulasidasa, and local legends of Rama prevalent in Mithila. As a woman banished by her husband for no fault of hers, Ganga Devi had experienced the agony of Sita. These two factors played a major role in the selection of episodes from the Rama story and their treatment in her work.

From the viewpoint of sequencing and the interrelationship of episodes, Ganga Devi's paintings of the *Ramayana* series can be divided into three categories. The most frequent category is that in which a single episode is depicted in an entire painting. The second type comprises a broad assemblage of selected popular episodes from the *Ramayana*, in which the sequential order of the principal events of the entire story is shown, with a number of intermediary incidents omitted. In the third category of this series Ganga Devi chose a comparatively larger segment or an entire chapter of the *Ramayana*, divided it into closely-knit and sequentially interrelated episodes, and thereby elaborated in detail upon a particular segment.

These three broad categories assume different typologies of pictorial narrative, but at the same time the narrative strategies do not necessarily vary drastically, one from the other. Indeed, the multi-episode narrative of the second and third categories is, in a way, an extension of the single episode device of the first category, except that in the former an added dimension of inter-episodic narrative, through sequential ordering, plays an important role.

Between 1975 and 77, Ganga Devi undertook the monumental task of painting the entire *Ramayana* in two paintings (290 cm x 155 cm each), together comprising twenty-seven selected episodes.[1] Typical of her mythological period, a separate panel or compartment with well-executed ornamental borders was earmarked for each episode. The first painting comprising eleven episodes is devoted to Rama's birth and personal life, leading up to his marriage to Sita. The second deals with Rama's banishment to the forest, Sita's abduction by Ravana, the annihilation of Ravana, and Rama's coronation - all in fifteen episodes. Both the paintings are divided

Previous page
Stories of Rama (I), Ganga Devi, 1975-76; ink on paper, 290 cm x 155 cm; collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 7/54/18. Detail 1: Conference of gods to discuss the annihilation of Ravana.

into three horizontal rows, each with four to six compartments depicting an equal number of episodes. The sequence moves from left to right in linear order, and the narrative device adopted is thus similar to that of a comic strip.

Once, in the course of an extended session, Ganga Devi narrated to me the entire story of the *Ramayana* as she had depicted in these two paintings. From this very enriching experience it became apparent to me that Ganga Devi's story of Rama had derived as much from the local popular versions prevalent in Mithila as from the local editions of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the *Ramacharitamanasa* of Tulasidasa, and the various Ramlila performances held in Mithila which she was very fond of watching.

The narrative of the first of the two paintings starts from the top left corner of the sheet portraying the conference of gods to discuss the annihilation of Ravana.

According to Ganga Devi, all the gods first approached Brahma and then Shiva with a request that they kill Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, who was tormenting the worlds and undermining the sacrifices of the sages. Brahma confessed his inability to do so, while Shiva said that Ravana was his devotee and therefore he could not kill him either. Then the gods approached Vishnu, who readily agreed, saying that he and his *anshas* or segments would take mortal incarnations in the family of King Dasharatha and his three queens to accomplish the task of killing Ravana.

In the painting, four-headed and four-armed Brahma is shown seated on a lotus in the left hand corner of the panel. Next to him is the standing figure of the four-armed Vishnu bearing his emblems: conch, disc, mace, and lotus. Vishnu is followed by Shiva carrying a trident and a pot, surrounded by snakes. The other figures include those of a four-armed Ganesha, seated in frontal posture; the standing figure of the celestial sage Narada carrying his *vina*, and seated and standing figures of other sages and the sun and moon.

In Ganga Devi's imagination, the gods live in heaven, which is comparable to the sky; she has thus shown all the figures floating in a free space surrounded by a maze of vegetation, with scarcely any indication of the earth below, except in the case of the two sages who, being creatures of the earth, are shown seated or walking on the ground (in this case the lower ornamental border of the panel), from where the vegetation too, grows and rises skyward. Ganga Devi has most indulgently conceptualised the central figure of Shiva. Once she mentioned that she routinely made offerings at a Mahadeva shrine in a mango grove near a pond in her village and that Shiva appeared to her. Ganga Devi's drawing of Shiva perhaps stems from this very personal communion with the deity. A number of snakes floating in the air form a marvellous halo around his head, and Ganga Devi has not forgotten to embellish the latter with the River Ganges, personified as a female, issuing from his matted hair. The beaming anthropomorphic images of the sun and the moon, directly taken from the pictorial motifs of the *kohbar-ghar*, add to the celestial character of the assembly. Before it incarnated in Ganga Devi's imagery, the entire pantheon had dwelt in her

mind and imagination for many years. Painting that pantheon was merely a matter of externalising and giving pictorial shape to the images she had reflected upon since childhood.

The next scene to the right portrays the *yajna,* sacrifice that King Dasharatha performed to obtain male offspring. According to Valmiki, Dasharatha first performed the great *ashvamedha* sacrifice, which was conducted by the renowned sage Rishyashringa. This was followed by the *puttatresti* ceremony performed for the actual conception of a male child. At the close as oblations were made to the sacrificial fire, a celestial being emerged from the fire carrying a golden vessel of *payasa,* milk pudding, which he handed over to Dasharatha. Dasharatha and his three consorts, Kaushalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra, partook of this divine food, soon after which the queens became pregnant.

In the painting Ganga Devi has not shown the horse sacrifice (and this is not mentioned in the *Ramacharitamanasa* either). Valmiki's *puttatresti* ceremony was referred to by Ganga Devi as *putra kamana yagya* (sacrifice fulfilling the wish for a male child), which, she said, she had illustrated in the upper half of the panel. Here Dasharatha is shown seated next to a triangular fire-alter flanked by the sages Rishyashringa and Vashishtha. Sacred objects, such as a ladle for pouring oblations, a conch, a jug of water, a heap of offerings, a tumbler, etc., are placed in the interstices.

In the lower half of the panel, Dasharatha is shown seated with the divine vessel containing *payasa*, which he distributes to his three consorts. Using a conceptual rather than a geometric perspective, Ganga Devi makes the images of Dasharatha and Rishyashringa larger than that of Vashishtha in the upper panel, and that of Kaushalya (the mother-to-be of Rama) larger than those of Kaikeyi and Sumitra (who were to beget Bharata and Lakshmana, and Shatrughna, respectively). Ganga Devi explained: 'Even according to Valmiki, Kaushalya had received a bigger portion of the celestial meal than the two other queens'. Clearly, every detail of the *Ramayana* had taken deep root in Ganga Devi's mind and is thus spontaneously reflected in her painting.

In the next panel, Ganga Devi depicts a regional story that is found neither in Valmiki nor in Tulasidasa. According to this popular episode, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna (along with their preceptor Vishvamitra) first appeared to Dasharatha, as his sons-incarnate as full-grown adults. Dasharatha told them that though he was greatly pleased that the four segments of Vishnu had come to him as his sons, he was concerned about what people would say about the sudden appearance of grown-up sons; he thus asked them to be born as infants through the wombs of his consorts.

The panel has been neatly framed within an arch formed by two trees, giving a subtle indication that the scene is set in Dasharatha's palace. Since the four brothers had not yet appeared as mortal children (Rama holding the emblems of Vishnu, and the three brothers carrying lotuses), the panel has been conceptualised in a celestial setting, with the sun and moon shining together and the sage Vishvamitra almost floating in the sky. Within

Opposite page
Top
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 2: King Dasharatha performing a sacrifice to obtain male offspring and distributing portions of celestial meal among his queens.

Bottom
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 3: Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna first appear as fully grown adults in front of Dasharatha as his sons-incarnate.

Top
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 4: The birth of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Shatrughna through Dasharatha's three consorts.

Bottom
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 5: Rama slaying the demoness Tataka.

the maze of creepers and branches, Ganga Devi has, very playfully and inconspicuously, placed a half halo around Rama, who is shown as four-armed Vishnu; and none of the brothers have their bows and arrows.

The next scene, which forms the last panel of the upper horizontal row, pertains to the birth of the four brothers through Dasharatha's three consorts. The masterpiece of pictorial narrative derives much from the everyday life of rural Mithila, combined with Ganga Devi's talent for innovation in using space within space and her highly poetic vocabulary.

Most striking are the cradles, in which the four babies are shown and the economic use of the positive and negative spaces of and between the cradles, respectively. In the villages of Mithila an infant is placed in a cradle made of a shallow basket with ropes converging at the top – an enlarged version of a scale pan – which is hung either from the branch of a tree or a beam of the house. In this panel, Ganga Devi has charmingly converted the commonplace cradle of Mithila into a royal one by making it a little more ornate and decking it with miniature parasols and tassels. Rama and Bharata are shown reclining, respectively, in the fist two cradles on the left while the problem of showing Lakshmana and Shatrughna in one cradle is resolved by making them sit in conversation. By doing this, the artist has also broken the visual monotony of a single line of three reclining figures. Each infant is embellished with a halo. In the negative spaces that automatically occur between the row of triangular scale pan-like cradles, Ganga Devi has skilfully adjusted a series of colonnaded arches, indicative of palatial surroundings. Once again the three mothers are shown below in descending order of importance.

The next scene is the first of the middle row and depicts Rama slaying the demoness Tataka (pronounced Tadaka in Mithila). When Rama was still in his teens, the sage Vishvamitra, having sought Dasharatha's permission, took Rama and Lakshmana into a forest to annihilate two dreaded demons, Maricha and Subahu. As they proceeded on their mission, they had to cross the Tataka Forest where Tataka, the fiercest *yakshini* turned demoness dwelt. Vishvamitra asked Rama to slay Tataka. In a long and fierce battle that ensued between Rama and Tataka, the latter was eventually slain. This story depicted by Ganga Devi is true to Valmiki's *Ramayana.*

In the painted panel, Ganga Devi's conceptualisation of the demoness is remarkable. Her face is apparently an improvised version of the demon masks commonly used in Ramlila performances. The long, loose tresses of hair flying in all directions, combined with a long tongue issuing out of a monkey-like mouth and an exposed pair of black breasts effectively portray the *yakshi*-demoness's hideous and terrible form. Here, as in the story, the demoness is literally 'cornered', and Rama is shown chopping off her nose with an arrow. Dense vegetation between the figures of Tataka, Rama, Lakshmana, and Vishvamitra indicates the proverbially impenetrable Tataka Forest.

In terms of pictorial typology, the image of Lakshmana chopping off the nose of the demoness Shurpanakha (occurring elsewhere in Ganga Devi's paintings) acts as a recurring formalised motif for the depiction of the killing of other demonesses such as Tataka, as depicted here.

Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 6: Annihilation of the demons Maricha and Subahu by Rama.

The second scene of the middle row narrates the annihilation of the demons Maricha and Subahu. As Rama, Lakshmana, and Vishvamitra reached the latter's hermitage, the sage began a ritual, under the protection of the two princes. On the night of the sixth day of the ritual, Maricha and Subahu, accompanied by several other demons, appeared at the site with thundering sound and raining blood. In Valmiki, Rama shot such a powerful arrow at Maricha that he was flung far into the ocean, Subahu being instantly killed. According to Ganga Devi, Maricha fell into Lanka where Ravana lived, and became his accomplice. Later, Maricha took the form of a golden deer who appeared before Sita to lure her with the beauty of its skin.

In the painting, Rama and Lakshmana are shown shooting arrows at the two demons, half emerging from the dense vegetation, in the bottom left corner of the panel. In the top left corner, Vishvamitra performs his sacrifice.

The third scene in the middle row depicts the liberation of Ahalya, one of the most popular legends of Mithila. The story of Ahalya, as narrated by Ganga Devi, runs as follows: Once Indra asked Surya to identify the most beautiful woman in the world. Surya responded by saying that he was unable to enlighten Indra on this subject because wherever he appeared, people went inside their homes, unable to bear his heat. Surya then

Stories of Rama (I). Detail 7: The liberation of Ahalya by Rama.

suggested that Indra ask Chandrama, the moon. When Indra put the same question to Chandrama, she said Ahalya, the wife of the sage Gautama, was the most beautiful woman she had seen. On hearing this, Indra went to Gautama's hermitage and, adopting the form of a cock, crowed shrilly at midnight. Gautama, believing it was already dawn, went to the river to bathe and say his morning prayers. In the meanwhile Indra assumed Gautama's form and made love to Ahalya. By then, Gautama realising that it was still midnight and not dawn, returned to his hut to find the door latched from inside. Ahalya opened the door in utter confusion, and Gautama was so enraged to see Indra and Ahalya together that he put a curse on Indra that he would develop phalluses all over his body. Looking at Ahalya, who stood silent like a rock, he said she would turn into a rock and remain so till the dust from Rama's feet fell on it in the *tretayuga*.[2] She would then return to her natural form.

Neither in Valmiki's *Ramayana* nor in Tulasidasa's *Ramacharitamanasa*, is there any reference to Ahalya being transformed into a rock nor the infliction of the multi-phallus curse on Indra. In those texts the enraged Gautama's curse was directed against his begetting progeny - a curse which, with the assistance of other gods, enabled Indra's testicles, apparently chopped off by Gautama, to be replaced by those of a sacrificial ram.

The story, as narrated by Ganga Devi, of Ahalya turning into a rock seems to be a popular version preserved in the local oral tradition of Mithila (and apparently incorporated into Ramlila performances). In the Valmiki

Ramayana, Ahalya was cursed to perform austerities in invisible form for thousands of years till she was liberated by Rama on his way to Janakpur.

However, in her painting Ganga Devi avoids illustrating the whole story. She has chosen to paint only the part directly relating to the liberation of Ahalya by Rama. Rama, preceding Lakshmana and Vishvamitra on their journey to Janakpur, is shown 'coincidentally' touching a rock with his foot; and Ahalya (instantaneously turning into a woman) stands gratefully before him with folded hands.

In showing Ahalya issuing out of a rock, the artist gives the rock the same grained texture as Ahalya's skirt: a kind of organic transfiguration appears to take place before the viewer's eyes.

The last panel of the middle row depicts the chance meeting of Rama and Sita in a grove in King Janaka's palace garden. Valmiki barely refers to such a meeting, but there is a prolonged description of it in Tulasidasa. Ganga Devi has apparently based her panel on that. According to Tulasidasa (as also narrated by Ganga Devi), Rama and Lakshmana went for a stroll in the garden which Sita happened to visit at the same time with her friends. Sita and her companions plucked flowers to offer Gauri (Parvati). They then went to Gauri's shrine, where Sita, after making the offerings, expressed her wish to win the best possible husband. One of her companions sneaked out to the grove where Rama was strolling. Impressed by Rama's beauty, she returned and told Sita about it. Sita became most anxious and eager to see Rama, who was ultimately shown to her from behind a creeper by her companions.

In the painted panel, Ganga Devi has placed the heavy stem of a sprawling creeper between Sita, followed by her companions, and Rama by Lakshmana and Vishvamitra. Here three focal points have been used by the artist, i.e. that of Sita and her friends looking at Rama and his companions from behind a creeper; that of Rama looking at Sita and her friends from the other side of the creeper; and that of the viewer looking at the entire scene in which Rama and Sita appear to face one another. This situation is typical of Sanskrit drama and, to a considerable extent, of Ramlila performances, where characters on the stage act as though they are oblivious of one another, while the audience can see both. In all probability, Ganga Devi derived inspiration for this pictorial device from the Ramlila theatre she so often patronised.[3]

In describing this episode, Tulasidasa makes a subtle distinction between the verbal and the visual narrative. Sita's companion, who saw Rama and Lakshmana in the grove, finding words inadequate to describe them, says *gira anayana nayana bin bani*, 'the speech does not have the vision and the vision does not have the speech'. Ganga Devi, true to the spirit of this couplet, differentiating between verbal and visual expression, fuses Tulasidasa's verbal narrative extremely sensitively in a pictorial conceptualisation of her own.

The next scene, forming the first panel of the lower row, depicts Sita worshipping Gauri, and is a continuation of the previous panel. Ganga

Opposite page
Top
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 8: Chance meeting of Rama and Sita in a grove in King Janaka's palace garden.

Bottom
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 9: Sita worshipping Gauri, wishing for the best possible husband.

Devi converts the simultaneous events in Tulasidasa into consecutive scenes to facilitate pictorialisation. Interestingly, this panel is distinguished from the next one not by the usual ornate, vertical borders, but by a tree, which bends leftwards and runs parallel to the horizontal band, forming a canopy over Sita and her companions. This stunning discovery of more fluid space, which gives a sense of continuity rather than rigid compartmentalisation, is used on a large scale in her subsequent painting 'The Cycle of Life'.

The next continuous scene encompasses King Janaka's 'bow sacrifice' and the ceremony in which Sita chooses a bridegroom for herself. Valmiki scarcely refers to this event, but Tulasidasa devotes a number of stanzas to it from which, apparently, Ganga Devi draws heavily.

According to Tulasidasa, Janaka had vowed that he would give his daughter in marriage only to a suitor who was able to successfully lift Shiva's mighty bow, then in his custody, and break it into two. As many as ten thousand kings, demon-kings, and princes from all the three worlds came to participate in the contest. Ravana, the mighty demon-king of Lanka, tried to lift the bow but went back humiliated. A few thousand other princes joined hands to collectively win the contest but were unable even to move the bow. The contest was presided over by the gods and attended, among others, by Rama and Lakshmana accompanied by the sage Vishvamitra.

In the painted panel, Ravana and other suitors are shown surrounding the giant-sized bow on the left. In the upper half of the rest of the panel, Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Ganesha preside over the 'bow sacrifice', and in the lower half Rama, Lakshmana, and Vishvamitra sit apart from the other contestants. Ganga Devi has been particular in segregating Ravana and others from Rama and Lakshmana, who emanate confidence and serene detachment.

In the last panel of this painting, Rama holds the two pieces of the bow that he has broken. He is with Lakshmana and Vishvamitra, and being applauded by the gods resident in heaven.

The second painting also has three horizontal rows, each with four to six scenes or panels. The painting starts with Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana wandering in the forest during their fourteen year banishment. The most significant element of this scene is the pictorial type casting of Sita – tall and slender, decked like a bride. Apparently the purpose of the panel is to establish the iconography and pictorial typology of the trinity, which keeps recurring, almost like a stock image, in the various narrative situations depicted in the rest of the painting.

The next scene in the upper row of this painting illustrates the popular story of the clever ferryman who tricked Rama into a situation in which he could gain merit by washing Rama's holy feet. The story, as narrated by Ganga Devi, runs as follows: Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana were banished to the forest. On leaving Ayodhya, they reached the Sarayu river. The ferryman who was to take them across knew that Rama was a divine incarnation. He wanted to wash Rama's feet to earn the great religious merit of 'crossing the ocean of birth and re-birth'. Well aware that Rama would not allow the

Opposite page
Top
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 10: King Janaka's bow-sacrifice.

Bottom
Stories of Rama (I).
Detail 11: Rama breaks the bow at King Janaka's bow-sacrifice to win Sita as his bride.

ferryman to humble himself, the latter told Rama: 'O Rama, before you sit in my boat, I must wash your feet because I have heard that as the dust of your feet fell on a rock, it turned into a woman (Ahalya). If my boat also turns into a woman by the touch of your feet, I shall be ruined because I already have a wife at home, and with two women to feed and the means of my livelihood gone, I shall be truly devastated. Unless you let me wash the dust of your feet, I shall not let you enter my boat.' Rama, moved by the ferryman's devotion, let him wash his feet.

In the painted panel, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana stand near the boat. The ferryman washes Rama's feet. The boat resembles the two-dimensional cardboard or plywood cut-out of a boat used in Ramlila performances. The

Stories of Rama (II).
Ganga Devi, 1977;
ink on paper,
290 cm x 155 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum, New Delhi,
Acc. No. 7/56/22.
Detail 1: Rama,
Lakshmana and
Sita banished to the
forest.

Stories of Rama (II). Detail 2: The story of the clever ferryman who tricks Rama into washing the latter's feet.

river is indicated by the presence of fish below the boat, a popular pictorial device in Mithila.

The next scene pertains to Maricha appearing as a golden deer to lure Sita. The episode is found with some variations of detail in almost all the versions of the Rama story, including Valmiki and Tulasidasa. According to Ganga Devi, Maricha was one of the two demons annihilated by Rama to protect Vishvamitra's sacrifice. He had been flung far into the ocean to begin a new life on an island as a devotee of Rama. When importuned by Ravana to help him abduct Sita, Maricha unwillingly acceeded to the request, in the belief that it would be better to die by Rama's arrow than at Ravana's hands. As we have seen, Maricha in the form of a golden deer was spotted

by Sita near her hut and, attracted by the beauty of its skin, she sent Rama to hunt the animal.

In the painted panel, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana are shown facing the swift and elusive deer who kept appearing and disappearing. Ganga Devi has once again used the device of multiple focal points to depict the sudden appearance, disappearance and re-appearance of the elusive deer. She bifurcates the various appearances of the deer by a partition of thick vegetation from the focal point of Rama, but has used a top-angle perspective so that both the appearances of the deer are visible to the viewer. Enchanted by this very effective pictorial device, she has re-used it several times, in subsequent works, indicative of an almost child-like fascination for her own discovery.

The next scene continues the previous episode; the elusive deer is killed and Ravana is about to abduct Sita. Rama had gone into the forest in pursuit of the golden deer, leaving Lakshmana behind to protect Sita. As the deer was shot by Rama's arrow, it called out for Lakshmana's help in Rama's voice, and Sita asked Lakshmana to rush to his help. When she was alone, Ravana appeared to Sita in the guise of a mendicant, with the intention of abducting her.

In the painting, Ganga Devi has tried to temporally accommodate simultaneous but spatially scattered situations in one multi-layered space. The three situations are: Lakshmana rushing to help Rama, who has just killed the golden deer; Ravana approaching Sita in order to abduct her; Ravana's chariot parked behind the bushes so that Sita cannot see it. All three pictorial situations are depicted within a common enclosure, as one continuous scene, in such a way that their temporal simultaneity becomes obvious to the viewer, even as he sees the three incidents taking place in three different spaces. While the characters of each of the three situations are supposedly unaware of the next situation, the viewer is able to see them all together, in one flattened, two-dimensional space – like in an architect's elevation drawing, where the dimension of depth is eliminated to represent a single focal point.

The theme of the next panel, i.e. the first in the middle row, on the left, depicts Jatayu obstructing Ravana's passage in an attempt to free Sita. According to Tulasidasa, Ravana abducted Sita from her hut in Panchavati and proceeded towards Lanka by air. Jatayu, an old vulture who was a devotee of Rama, saw the incident and immediately attacked Ravana. Jatayu offered a tough fight to mighty Ravana, rendering his powerful bow and arrows ineffective, but finally fell to the ground when his wings were severed by Ravana.

Opposite page
Top
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 3: The demon Maricha appears as golden deer to Sita.

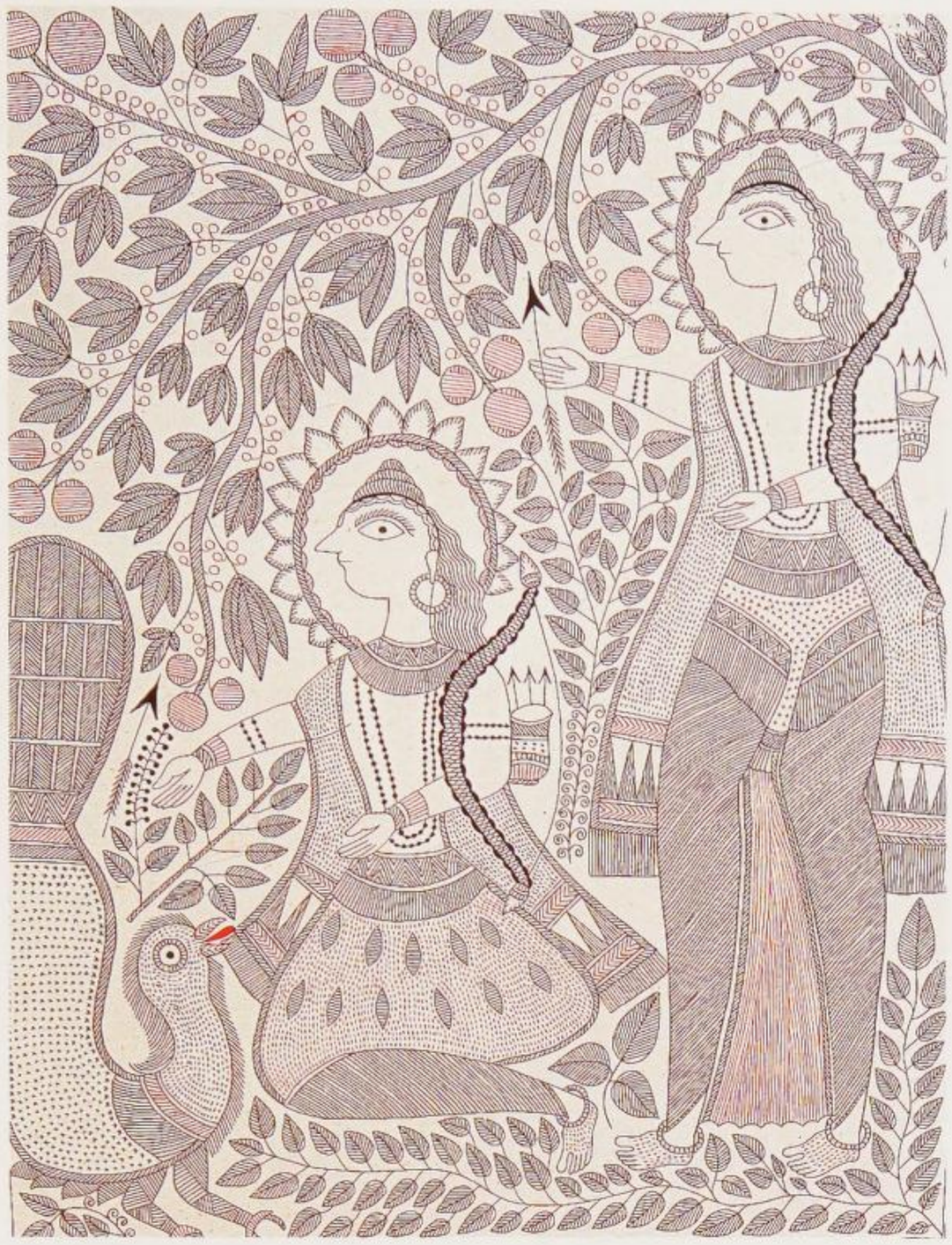
Bottom
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 4: The abduction of Sita.

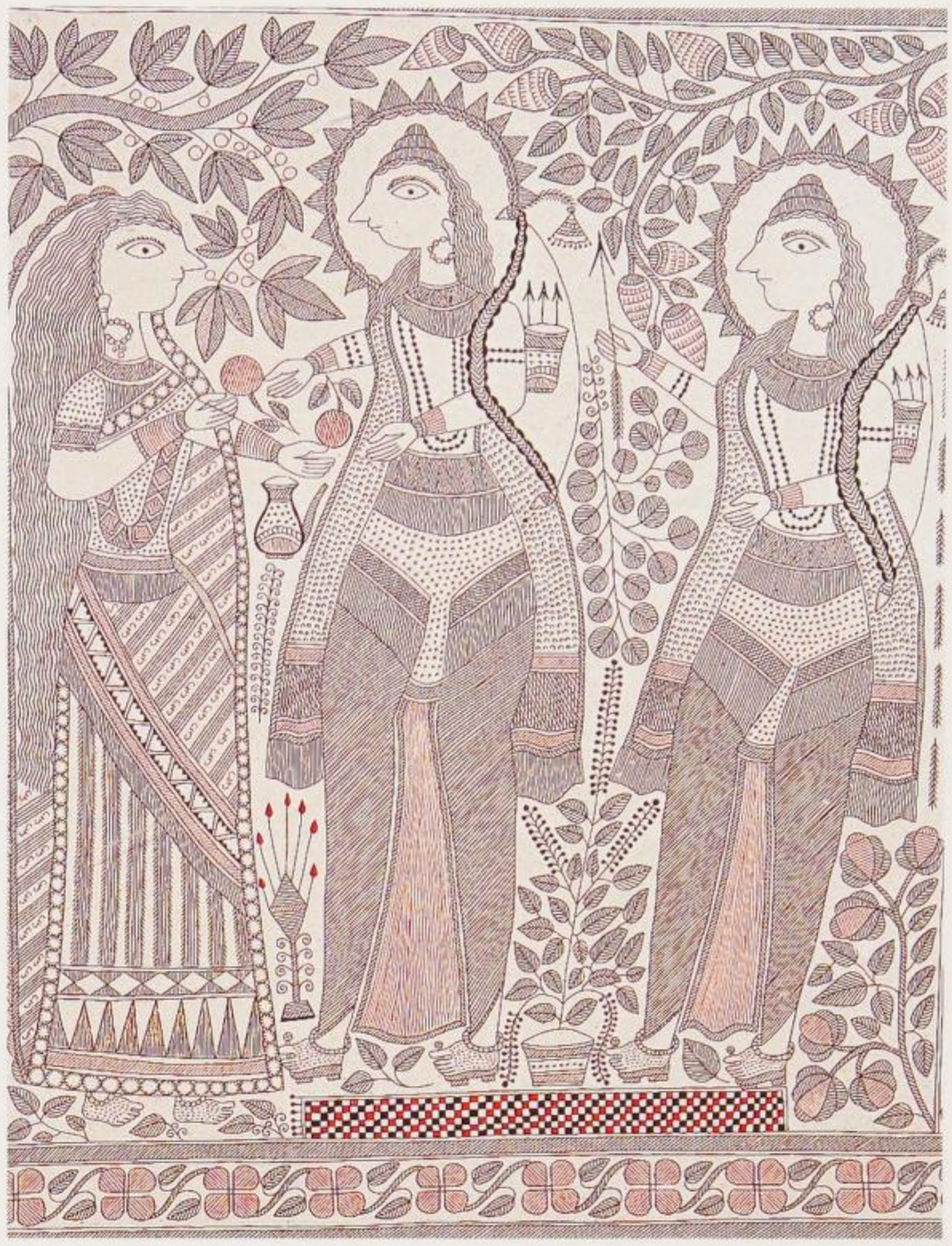
In the painting, almost the entire left half of the panel is devoted to accommodating the towering personality of Ravana fighting the giant vulture, Jatayu. Sita is beautifully placed inside the arch of the chariot (on the right, standing) moving forcefully forward like the goddess Durga killing the buffalo demon: it seems Ganga Devi is providing a literal illustration of Tulasidasa when he describes Sita in the *Balakanda*: 'Sita's beauty is indescribable, she is Jagadambika herself.' Tulasidasa does not refer to

Stories of Rama (II).
Detail 5: Jatayu obstructs Ravana's passage in an attempt to free Sita.

Ravana moving in a chariot. He only says that he travelled through the sky. In Ramlila performances, the scene is often enacted with a chariot; and Ganga Devi probably derives her imagery from the visual memory of one such performance. Interestingly, the entire area of the bottom right corner is filled with Ravana's arrows, emphasising how stoutly Jatayu resisted Ravana.

In the next panel Rama and Lakshmana are shown talking to Jatayu. According to the story, Rama and Lakshmana, when searching desperately for Sita, found the grievously wounded and bleeding Jatayu lying in the forest, muttering Rama's name. As soon as Jatayu saw Rama, he told him that Sita had been abducted by Ravana who had gone southward. Jatayu obtained the boon of liberation from the cycle of birth from Rama as a reward for his devotion, and died instantly. In the painted panel, the wingless Jatayu talks to Rama, as Lakshmana stands nearby.





Left
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 6: Heavily wounded Jatayu giving information about Sita's abduction to Rama and Lakshmana.

Right
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 7: Rama and Lakshmana meeting Shabari who directed them to Pampasar, the abode of Sugriva.

The following panel relates to Shabari meeting Rama and Lakshmana. Shabari apparently belonged to a forest tribe. She directed Rama to the kingdom of Pampasar where Sugriva lived. Sugriva was eventually to be of great assistance to Rama in his battle against Ravana.

The next panel deals with the theme of Rama and Lakshmana meeting Hanuman and Sugriva. Following Tulasidasa, Ganga Devi relates the story as follows. Shabari told Rama that he should go to Pampasar where, on the periphery of the town, there would be a hill called Rishimukh Parvat on which Sugriva was camping. He would help Rama in his search for Sita. When Rama arrived at Rishimukh Parvat, Hanuman, an attendant of Sugriva, met him in the guise of a Brahmin to find out all he could about him and his purpose in wandering around the forest. Hanuman then took Rama and Lakshmana on his shoulders to Sugriva and made them take an oath on the testimony of Agni (fire) that Rama would help Sugriva to retrieve his kingdom from his brother Bali; in return Sugriva's army of monkeys would search for Sita and eventually fight the battle against Ravana.

In Ganga Devi's painting, Rama and Lakshmana talk to Hanuman in the foreground; Sugriva squats on the hill in the background. Interestingly, the figure of Hanuman painted here is based on an early drawing of the deity by Ganga Devi and intended as a *nav sikha ke namuna*, i.e., an 'aide-memoir for the novice'. This pencil drawing is datable to the late 1940s and bears Ganga Devi's signature and a note in her handwriting, certifying that it is her work.[4]

The next scene depicts the fight between Bali and Sugriva. Although Rama

Stories of Rama (II). Detail 8: Rama and Lakshmana meeting Hanuman and Sugriva for the first time.

had promised that he would annihilate Bali and install Sugriva as the King of Pampasar, Sugriva was not fully convinced that Rama possessed divine powers or that he could kill the mighty Bali. To convince him, Rama performed the feat of piercing seven palm trees, *saptatala,* with a single arrow. Under Rama's protection, Sugriva came to Pampasar and challenged Bali to a fight. Rama eventually killed Bali with a single arrow and installed Sugriva as King of Pampasar.

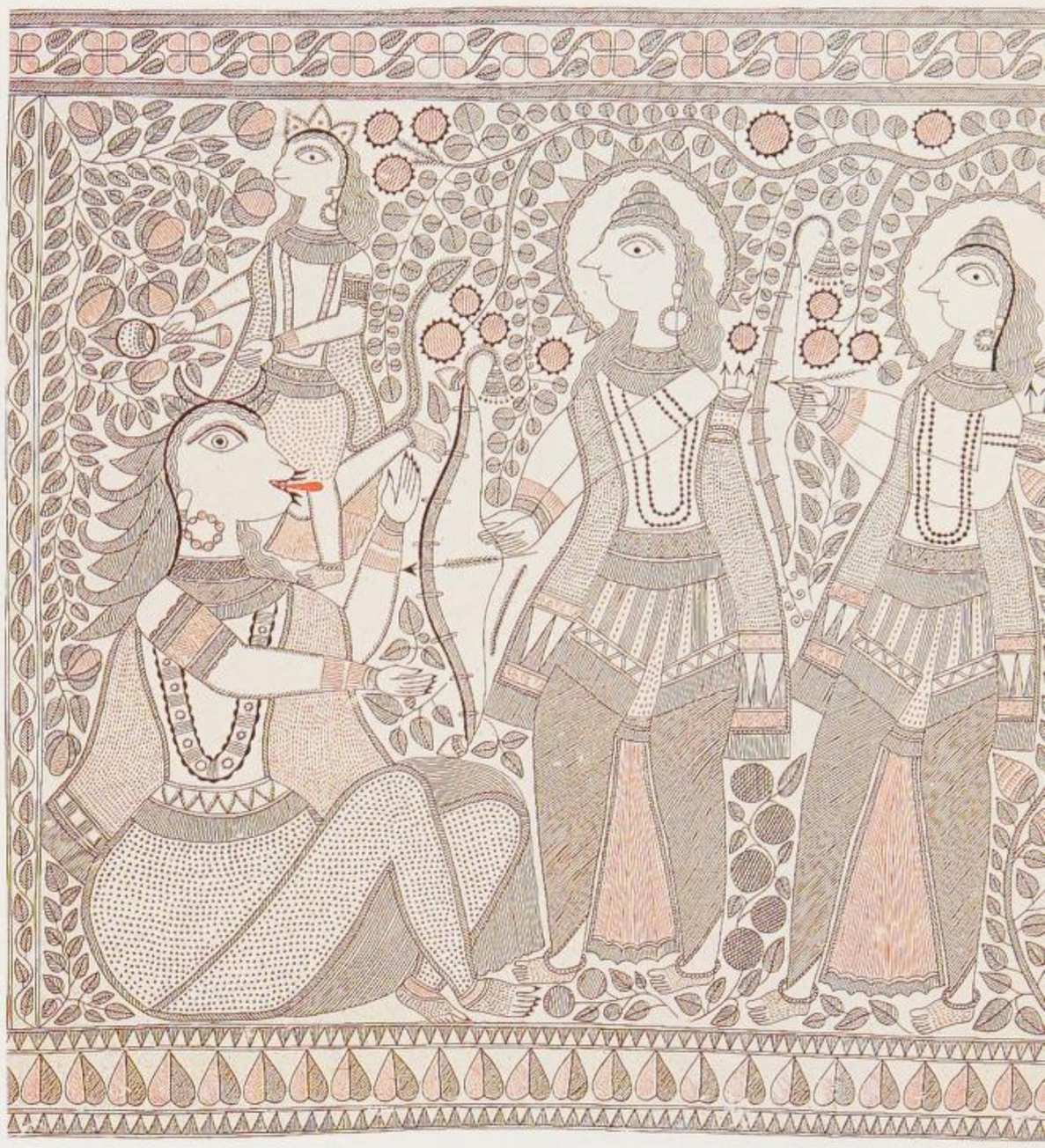
In the panel illustrating the above episode, Ganga Devi has once again shown her genius as an inventor of new devices of pictorial narrative. The panel is neatly divided into two halves by a straight, vertically rising palm tree. The left half depicts the combat between Bali and Sugriva, the right half Rama and Lakshmana shooting arrows. The central positioning of the palm serves as a 'bush', from behind which Tulasidasa says Rama shot an arrow at Bali. Ganga Devi has tried to assimilate the above mentioned episode of *saptatala*, with that of Rama fighting from behind a bush, using a single palm tree. This dual use of the palm makes the panel at once compact and symbolic.

The last scene in the middle row shows Hanuman leaping across the ocean in search of Sita. As mentioned earlier, Ganga Devi's Hanuman is based on one of her early drawings. The general depiction of Hanuman's crown, the

Stories of Rama (II). Detail 9: The fight between Bali and Sugriva.

mace in his right hand, the posture, the clothing, and even the treatment of the body fur indicate that this image of Hanuman was formalised by Ganga Devi in early youth and came in handy twenty years later in this *Ramayana* series. The cultic image that was earlier cast as a type is now reused as vocabulary for narrative painting in the context of the story of the *Ramayana*. Ironically, Ganga Devi's Hanuman image, conceptualised as a deity in her early drawing, was slightly altered and used by her 'to play the role' of Hanuman, the close associate of Rama; a role, in turn, imparted to him the status of a deity. This circular relationship of imagery – from icon, to a character in the *Ramayana*, to an icon – is a representative example of complex derivations in Ganga Devi's pictorialisation of the epic.

The first scene in the bottom row depicts Hanuman reaching the Ashoka grove and delivering Rama's ring to Sita with the message that he would soon come and liberate her. In the painted panel, Ganga Devi uses her familiar device of segregating one character from another by means of a branch of a tree, especially in a situation where one character is not aware of the presence of the other. Here Hanuman is shown royally seated on a bending branch of an Ashoka tree, conspicuously holding Rama's ring which he is about to fling to Sita who is unaware of his presence in the grove. That branch, which acts as Hanuman's 'throne' above, forms a protective arch over Sita. The demoness guarding Sita has been



Opposite page
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 10: Hanuman jumping across the ocean in search of Sita.

Top left
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 11: Here two episodes can be seen, i.e. Hanuman delivering Rama's ring to Sita in Ashoka grove and Hanuman putting flames on Ravana's Lanka.

Top right
Stories of Rama (II). Detail 12: Ravana's brother Vibhishana seeks Rama's protection.

meticulously drawn. Her long, loose, flaming hair flying in all directions seems to embody Ganga Devi's imagination in the portraiture of creatures of this class.

The narrow vertical panel that follows shows Hanuman setting Ravana's Lanka ablaze. Hanuman had been caught alive by Ravana's guards after he had rampaged the Ashoka grove. On Ravana's orders, a rag was tied to his tail and set alight. Hanuman jumped from house to house, his burning tail setting the entire city afire.

In the small panel illustrating this event Ganga Devi has achieved a milestone of pictorial expression. Hanuman is shown majestically striding in the sky, surrounded by innumerable flames that obscure the city.

The next panel pertains to Ravana's brother, Vibhishana, striving to convince Ravana that he should return Sita to Rama rather than wage a battle against him, for that would cause his own destruction. Ravana could not be persuaded, so Vibhishana abandoned him and went over to Rama to seek his protection.

The following panel represents the climactic episode of Rama killing Ravana. Ganga Devi's rendering of the fallen Ravana is so magnificent that the figure of Rama seems overshadowed by Ravana's fallen body. Ravana's multiple arms, drawn to appear like a swiftly-turning multi-spiked wheel, his elongated torso accentuating his powerful personality, combined with his horizontal posture occupy nearly half the panel in such a manner that the two monkeys seem to have lost their sense of direction in the vertigo brought about by the fall – even the creepers seem to have begun to circumambulate Ravana. Remarkably, the left half of the painting is

Stories of Rama (II). Detail 13: Rama killing Ravana.

characterised by a sense of horizontality and the right half, contrastingly, by that of static verticality.

The last scene depicts Rama's coronation. At the centre, Rama and Sita are shown, for the first time, facing the front. On the left are Lakshmana and Vishvamitra, and on the right Bharata and Shatrughna. Hanuman sits at Rama's feet. The rendering of the panel is somewhat dull and desultory.

From Word to Visual Image

Ganga Devi's *Ramayana* series marks the beginning of her narrative painting. She selects highly compressed and intermittent episodes, identifies the climactic action of each, and reduces the visual imagery to the minimum required to sustain the threadbare storyline. This selective approach to episodes, and the corresponding 'reductive imagery',[5] indicates a hesitant narrator, which Ganga Devi was at this initial stage of her work. Each episode is nearly exclusive, self-contained, complete in itself, and rigidly compartmentalised. Once the space required for the episode is vaguely envisaged, a rectangular enclosure bound by four ornate borders is earmarked. Images associated with the basic episode are recalled. The characters begin to occupy their positions with the requisite postures and gestures, rarely overlapping one another, and in terms of size, strictly in the order of importance.

The first characters to be drawn are those related to the climactic part of the episode, followed by renderings of the secondary characters. For instance, in the slaying of Tataka, the figures of Rama and Tataka are drawn

first, followed by the secondary figures of Lakshmana and Vishvamitra. The next in priority are the paraphernalia of relevant objects, such as ritual accessories in the scenes dealing with sacrifices, or symbols such as the sun and moon that appear as divine witnesses on solemn occasions. The remaining spaces are filled with sprawling vegetation – sometimes used as scene dividers, sometimes to embody nature, but in most instances as space-fillers (as Ganga Devi pointed out in another context, 'emptiness is tantamount to infecundity').

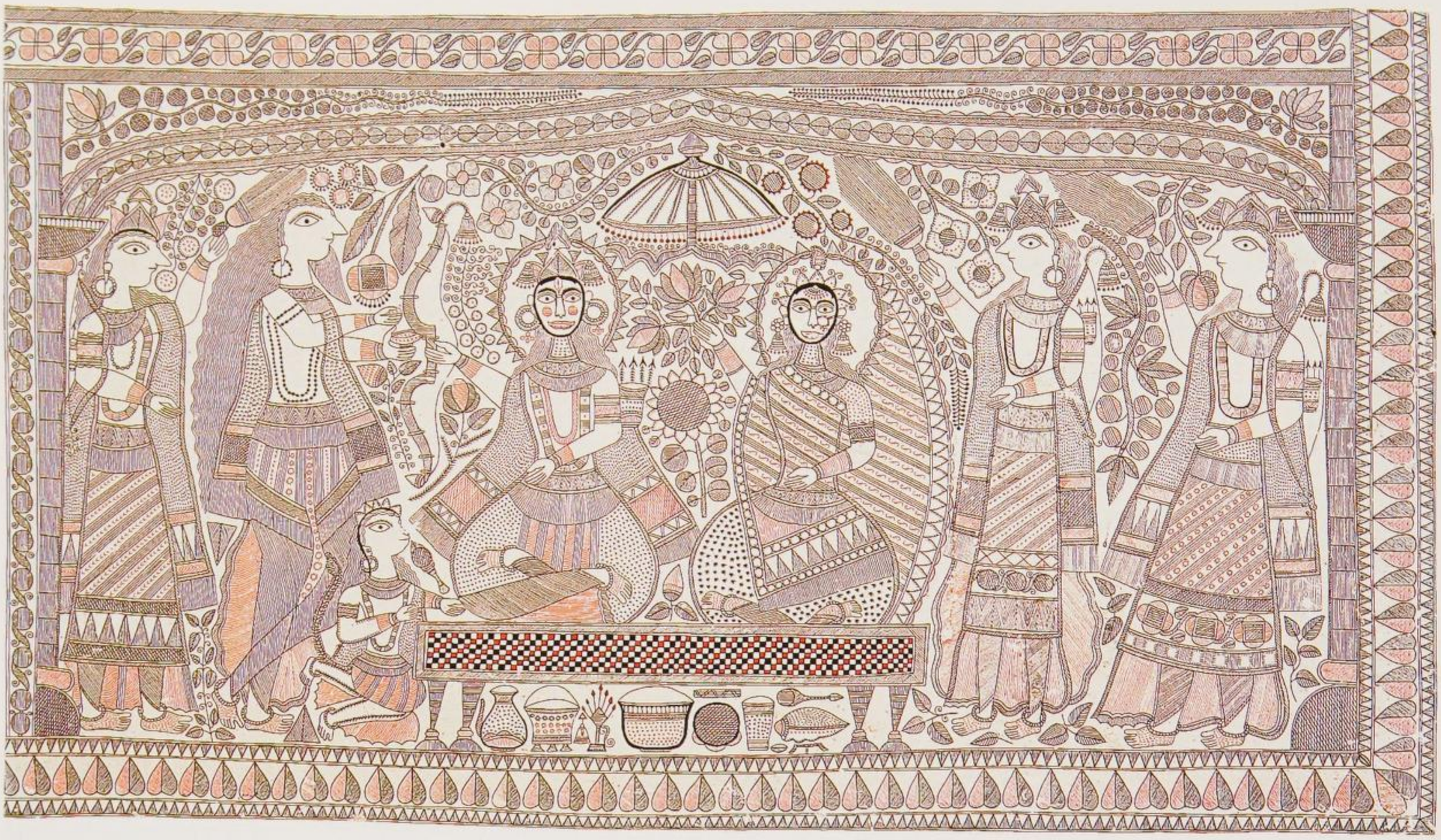
Ganga Devi's *Ramayana* does not unfold in any known geography or earthly environment of clouds, mountains, rivers, or forts, palaces and streets. Perhaps, to maintain its celestial character, Ganga Devi has avoided any reference to ordinary human geography, except in reserving the upper portion of a panel for the inhabitants of heaven and the sky, and the lower one for creatures of the earth. In using this device she seems to be asserting that the events of her *Ramayana* occurred in a time and space far removed from ours, and thereby instantaneously imparted a mythological quality to the painting.

In this early narrative phase Ganga Devi had to confront the problem of perspective, of depicting the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface, converting the temporal sequence of the text (or story) into a spatial situation, and translating the mythical images into pictorial ones. She bypassed the problem of perspective by eliminating the dimension of depth completely. For her, the true nature of painting is two-dimensional; she thus does not attempt to simulate the third dimension through shading or overlapping images to indicate depth; each character, each object, each leaf, flower or blade of grass is provided with its own free space.

The faces of the characters in Ganga Devi's *Ramayana* are almost invariably shown in profile – deeply engaged in the action of the scene. This is a feature common to all story-based painting anteceding the age of photography.[6]

Another ingenious use of profile in Ganga Devi's painting is in the demarcation of one scene from another. In each scene the figure on the extreme left is shown in profile, looking to the right, and the figure on the extreme right, again in profile, looks to the left. In this arrangement of figures, those at the right or the left extremity of a scene are set back to back to those in the next scene. Occasional exceptions to this profile-based determination of a scene occurs when an episode requires all the characters to move in one direction. These compositional devices make each scene appear self-contained and, at the same time, dramatically intensify the involvement of the characters in the climactic deed, giving them the sense of participation and action so necessary in narrative painting.

The only consciously intended use of a frontal position in this *Ramayana* series is in the last scene, which depicts the coronation of Rama. Here Rama and Sita are no longer characters participating in a scene by scene unfolding of the story, but presented as divine images to be venerated by devotees (viewers). The transition in this dual style of painting from the depiction in profile as third person singular to that in frontal position as



Stories of Rama (II). Detail 14: Coronation of Rama.

second person singular, in relation to the viewer, also marks a parallel transformation of Rama from a mere mortal to a divinity. In the process, the viewer is transformed into a devotee, directly facing the object of veneration. Sita is shown with a halo around her head.

I have repeatedly referred to the impact of the Ramlila on Ganga Devi. Here, she evolves an effective strategy to depict the more complex narrative situations by deriving elements from the popular Ramlila theatre. Ganga Devi has mentioned that she first witnessed a Ramlila performance in Chatara village and, later, in Rasidpur. A few days before her husband's second marriage, she went on a pilgrimage to Janakpur where, she said, she witnessed Ramlila performances continuously for fifteen days in fifteen different villages. It was about 15 years after this major exposure to the Ramlila that she did a number of paintings related to the story of Rama over a span of six to eight years.

The Cycle of Life

Between 1983 and 1985 Ganga Devi worked on a large painting entitled *Manav Jivan*, 'The Cycle of Life'. Drawing in fine line with pen on paper in black and red, she conceived the entire painting as a continuous narrative depicting the human journey from conception to initiation into the various stages of life of the Kayasths of Mithila. These include the sacraments of marriage and procreation, signifying the continuity of life from one generation to the next. For the first time in her artistic career, Ganga Devi painted a theme related to everyday life and immediate human surrounding. This was a departure from the normal conventions of Mithila painting and posed a new challenge. Being unprecedented in the tradition of Mithila painting, Ganga Devi had to delve deep into her imagination to find a suitable pictorial vocabulary. The results were astonishingly original.

In her earlier *kohbar* wall-paintings and *aripan* floor paintings, Ganga Devi had constructed images within the conventional iconography of these ritual paintings. In her *Ramayana* series, while still discovering the potentiality of fine pen drawing on paper, she had sought to reinterpret the imagery of the Ramlila performances as well as the popular local versions of the *Ramacharitamanasa*. But by the time she painted the 'The Cycle of Life', Ganga Devi appears to have felt more comfortable with the technique of pictorial narration and miniature drawing with pen and ink on paper; she thus ventured to depict the entire story of human life as a continuous pictorial narrative in which each image and sequence is freshly conceptualised, without a counterpart in her earlier work or in the entire Mithila tradition. She executed the painting on an epic scale, replete with details regarding the traditional manners and customs, beliefs, and practices of an entire culture.

Unlike in her *Ramayana* series, here she eliminates the rigid compartmentalisation of scenes. There is no sharp dividing line between the merging of one scene and the emergence of another, but scenes are occasionally separated from one another by certain pictorial devices such as staggered perspectives or altered profiles, or by simply filling up the interstices between two scenes with sprawling creepers or branches. The resultant effect is that of a universe teeming with people, trees, birds, animals – all a part of the great celebration of life – from one birth to the next.

The temporal sequence of the events of 'The Cycle of Life' has been unfolded through four horizontal bands, one below the other, each with a series of scenes running from left to right encompassing a multitude of images in a two-fold interaction of time and space.

This magnificent work comprises approximately twenty-four scenes, each representing a significant event in the lives of those born and growing up in Mithila. It encompasses the following: rites of puberty, pregnancy, birth, severance of the umbilical cord, the worship of deities associated with childbirth, the first breast-feeding, warding off evil spirits, purification after childbirth, the worship of family deities, physical training of the child, the tonsure ceremony, schooling, participation in the rain-making ceremony, farming and irrigation, temple rituals and worship, the betrothal ceremony, wedding ceremony, and the newlywed bride in pregnancy. The last indicates that the cycle continues.

As we unscroll *The Cycle of Life*, event by event:

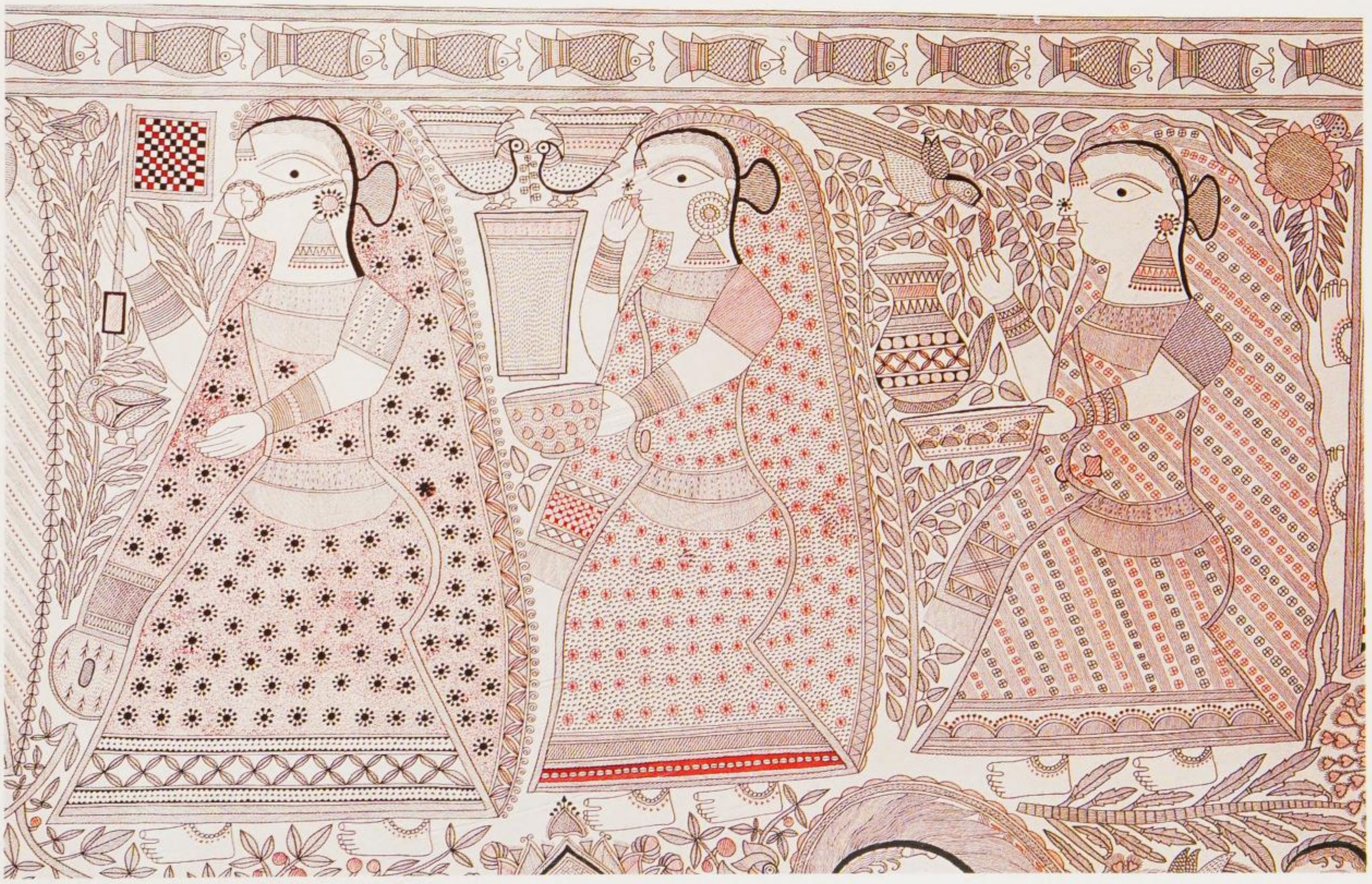
1
The very first scene emerges with a powerful image of a young woman standing on an *aripan* diagram, representing the female organ smeared with menstrual blood, and being given a purificatory bath on attainment of puberty. Her majestic figure, with long flame-like tresses spreading outwards and an ocean-like aura of fine streams of water being poured over her, flanked by branches of a tree with new blossoms being sucked by bees, is a haunting image stemming from Ganga Devi's deep perception of a collective cultural tradition and her individual artistic ability. A little girl is shown greeting the young woman with a vegetable slicer and a bunch of lotus flowers; the bells attached to the slicer sing: 'May you have prosperity and happiness'[1] as if echoing Vidyapati: 'The jingling bells around her waist sang glory to the god of love'.[2] Thereafter, successive scenes appear in the following sequence:

2
The same young woman appears once again, but now pregnant with a male child. In line with the customs relating to pregnancy in Mithila, the woman is shown here with a pebble, *durdubha* grass, and *anu* grains tied in one corner of her sari. Her companions are shown bringing food and drink to fulfil the cravings experienced during this period.

3
The pregnant woman reclines on the ground while the child inside the womb prays with folded hands: 'O God, liberate me from this hell'. The

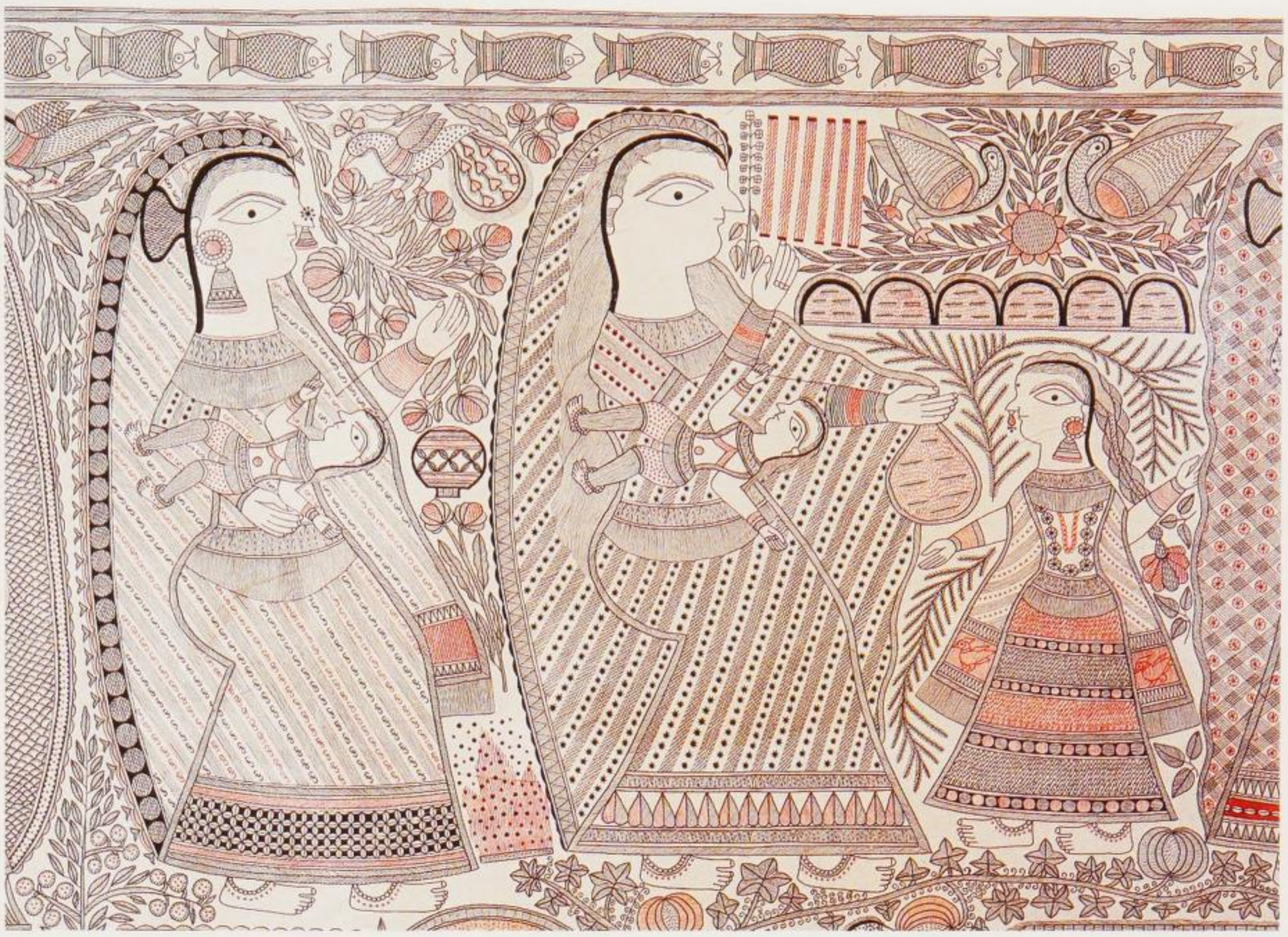
1
Previous page
The Cycle of Life.
Ganga Devi, 1983-85;
ink on paper,
152 cm x 328 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum, New Delhi;
Acc. no. 84/704.
Detail 1: A young woman
being given a ritual bath
on the attainment of
puberty.

2
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 2: The woman,
now pregnant is attended
to by relatives.



3
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 3: sThe pregnant woman reclining on the ground.

4
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 4: The woman giving birth to a child.



5
The Cycle of Life. Detail 5: The young mother (appearing twice in the picture) stands in front of a fire to evade evil spirits, prepares for the Ritual of the Sixth.

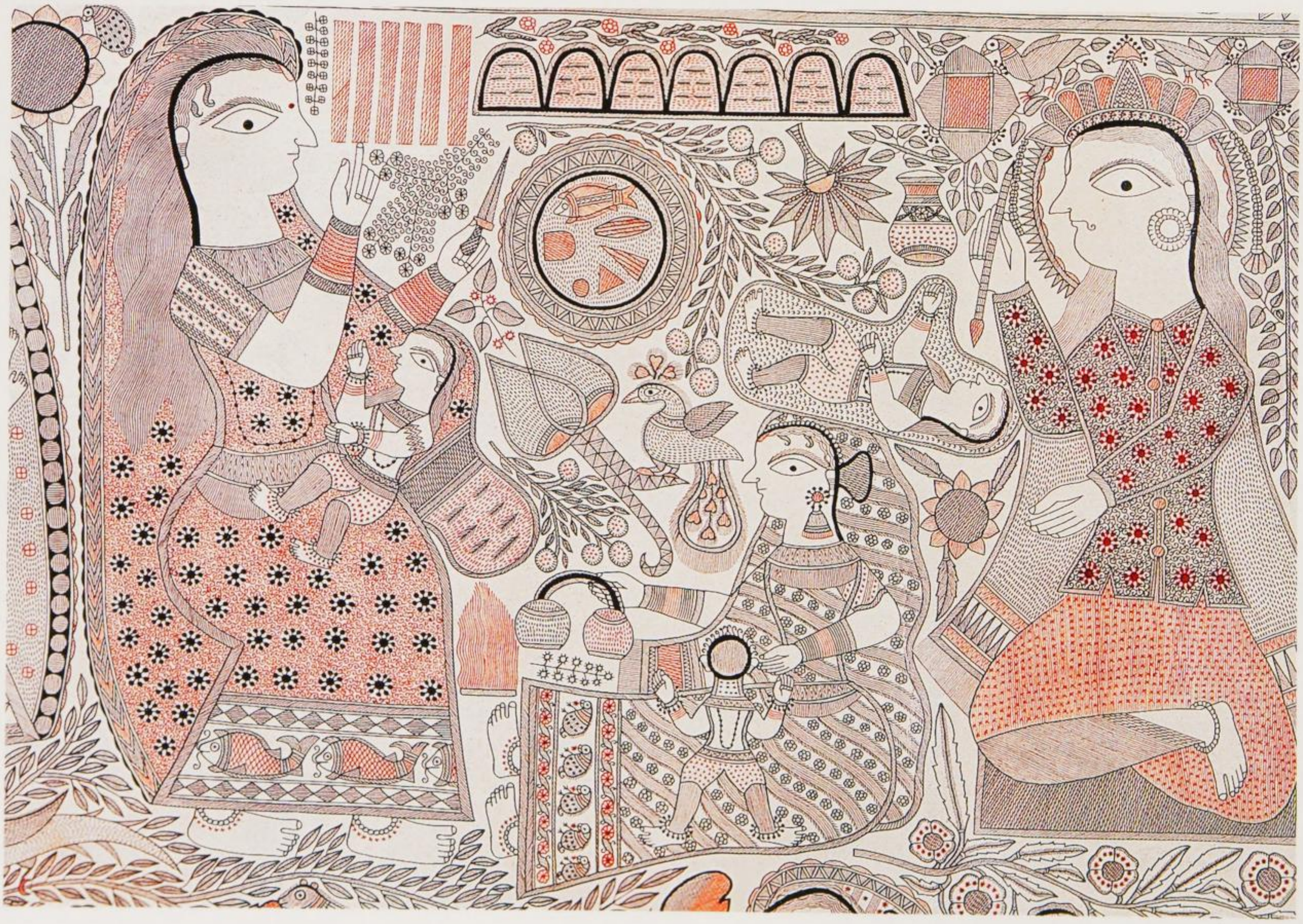
woman is depicted holding a bunch of mangoes in her left hand. Ganga Devi saves the image from becoming a formalised icon of a mother-goddess by letting birds pick at the mangoes, and thus remaining rooted in the human world of Mithila where natural objects and religious symbols are intrinsically related.

4
Two women helping in childbirth, cutting the umbilical cord, while the newly-born baby lies on freshly harvested paddy stocks, believed to keep the baby warm. As a bird dips its beak into the bowl of water carried by a midwife, a pair of flying parrots make love, symbolising genesis.

5
The young mother stands in front of a fire in which seeds of mustard and thyme are offered. The fragrant smoke is believed to be good for the health of young mothers, driving away evil spirits. After thus cleansing the air, the mother prepares for the worship of Chhatthi, Sixth, the goddess of childbirth conventionally venerated on the sixth day after birth. The goddess is symbolically depicted in the form of six vermilion stripes painted on the wall and six piles of grain placed on the ground.

6
In the meanwhile the neighbours and relatives flock in to see the baby. They bring lotus flowers, associated with plenty and prosperity. The mother of the new-born is not supposed to breast-feed the child for the first three days. Thereafter and only after washing her breasts with water, is she allowed to breast-feed the infant. This being done on the third or fourth day, Ganga Devi has depicted the event just before the elaborate pictorialisation of the ceremonies of the sixth day.

7-8
The propitiation of the goddess Chhatthi for the female and male child,



respectively, are next depicted. The scenes cover in extraordinary detail the local practices and customs of the Kayasths of Mithila. The first scene pertains to the ceremony on behalf of the female child. The mother holds a knife against the possible evil eye. A member of the family applies collyrium to the child and massages it with *ubtan*, a mixture of oil, wheatmeal, and turmeric. To the right is the figure of Chitragupta, pen in hand and believed to be descending into the house for the Chhatthi ceremony to 'write' the destiny of the new-born. Fish, a symbol of auspiciousness in Mithila, are depicted on a plate, but Ganga Devi's deep-rooted perceptions of her tradition inspires her to also place the motifs of a pair of fish on the border of the mother's sari, and to depict in stylised geometric form the bamboo grove – a symbol of the male – which is worshipped by the young bride at the time of her marriage in the *kohbar-ghar*. Another detail that deserves notice is the presence of a pen and an inkwell along with a palm leaf. This is to ensure the child's literacy and education. The second scene pertains to the sixth-day ceremony of the male child and hardly differs from the first.

6
Opposite page
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 6: Neighbours and relatives flock in to see the baby.

7-8
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 7: 'Ritual of the Sixth'.

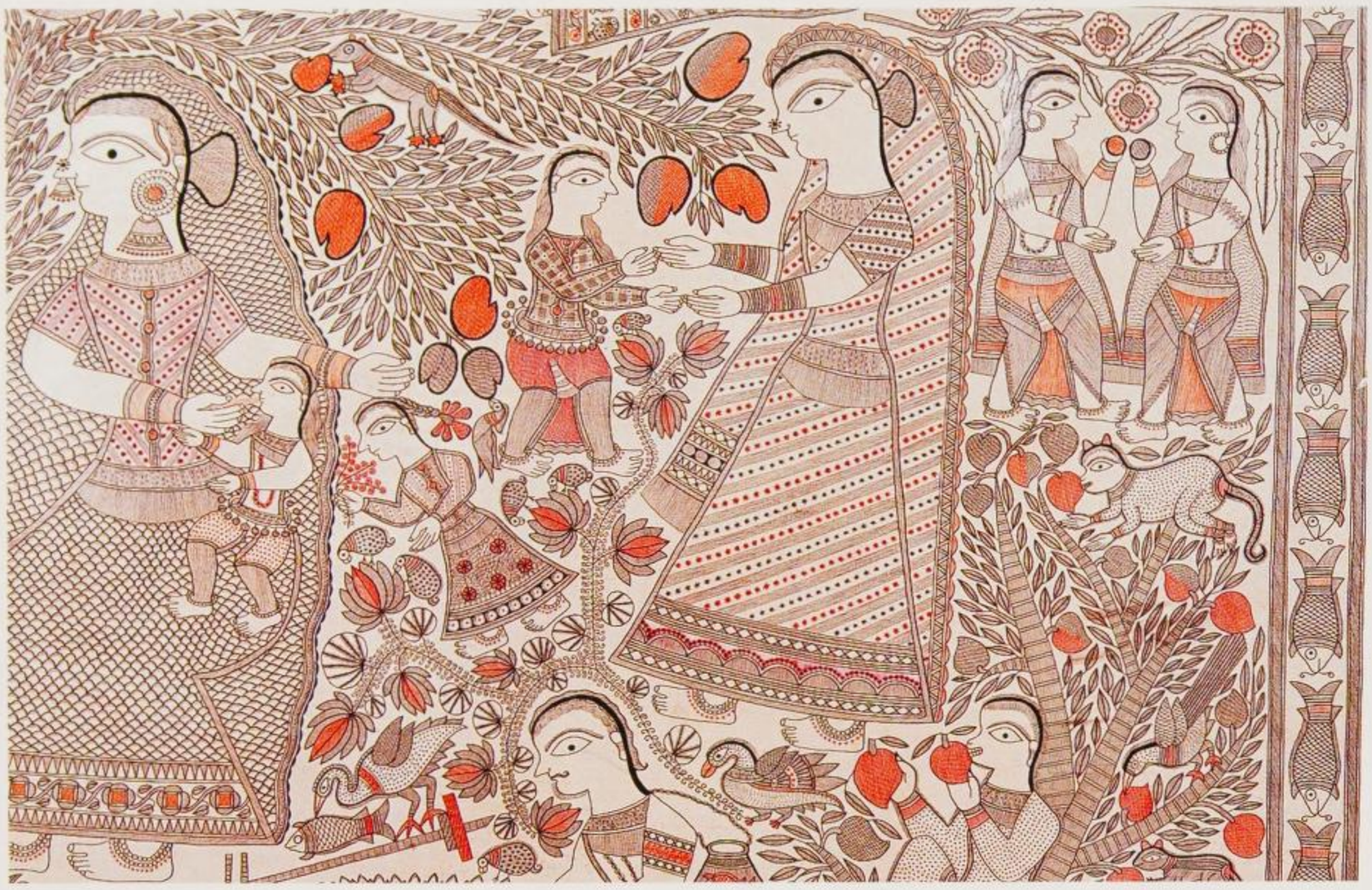
9-10
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Details 9 and 10: Final purification bath of the mother after delivery, *pamadia* musicians dancing while carrying the child.

9-10

The mother is shown seated with a knife in her hand 'cutting' *jaunva*, a 'poisonous wind' that is believed to blow periodically causing infants to fall ill. The woman facing the mother is trimming the latter's toenails, symbolic of purification after childbirth. On her side is placed a basketry platter containing coins presented to the new-born; the platter is believed to absorb the effects of the evil eye.

After her nails have been trimmed, the mother takes the final purificatory bath, after which she is considered cleansed of all impurities and is allowed to move freely around the house, including the kitchen. Here, two *pamadias*, dancer-musicians, are shown drumming and dancing as they carry the child. The *pamadias* are given clothes and grain lest they curse the child.

Between the musicians is the male child (a slate, with scribbling, placed over the chest signifies the male child; a cooking pot in the same position depicted in the next scene, indicates the female child).



11
Previous page
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 11: Worship of the *kuladevata*, the family deity by the mother and child.

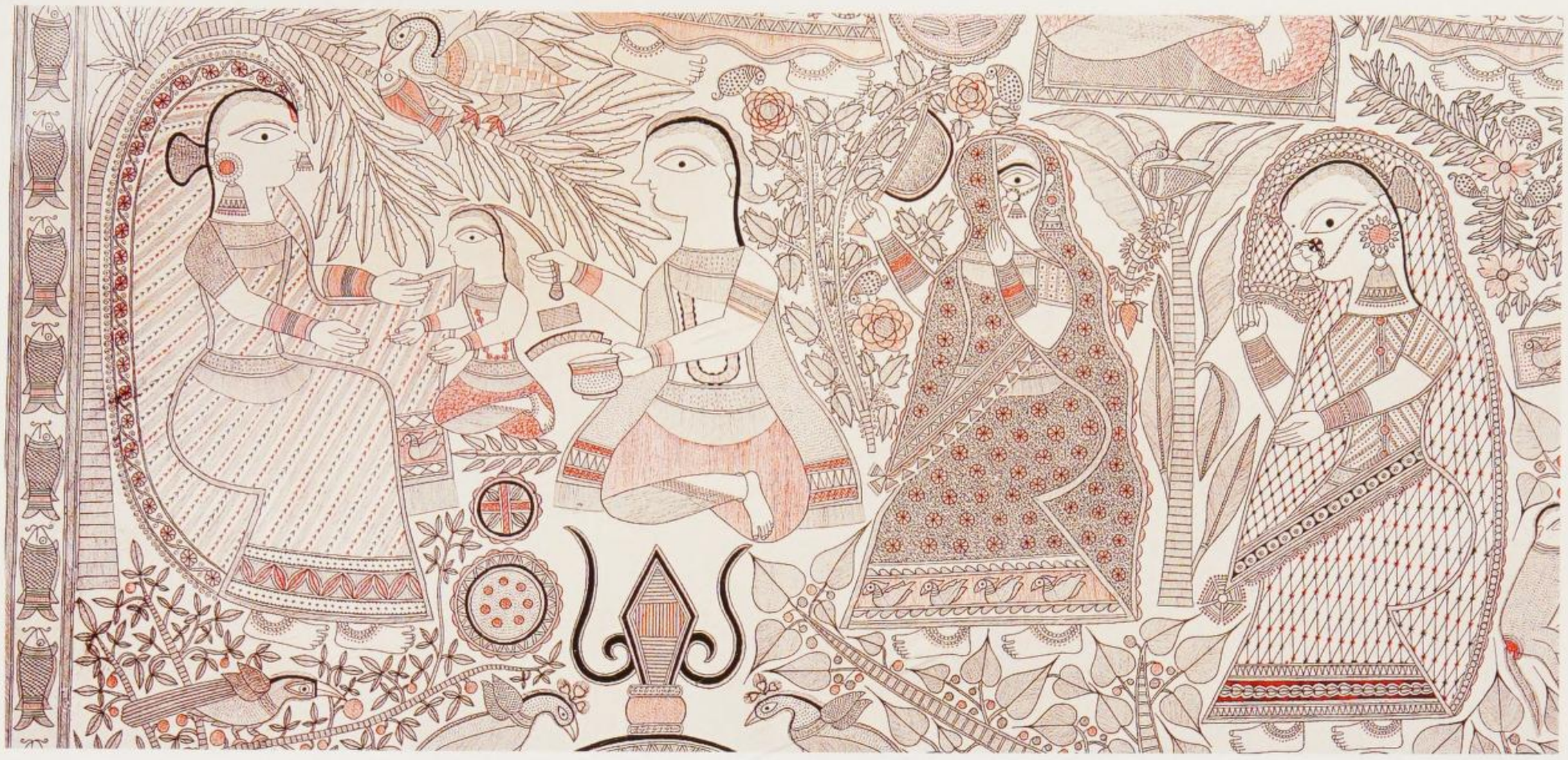
12
Left
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 12: Early morning walk and physical training of the child.

11
This scene pertains to the worship of the *kuladevata*, the family deity, by the mother and child. The pictorial scheme here is interesting. The seat of the family deity being the house, the entire scene is placed inside a frame in the shape of a house with a tapering roof. The towering figure of the mother gracefully bending her head over the child in her lap stands in front of the shrine of the *kuladevata* with folded hands. In front of the shrine are offerings of *aripan*, flowers, lamps and incense. This room of the house has been separated from the secular area by a vertical band. Here the child is shown lying in a cradle and playing with stuffed cradle-toys hanging from above. Next to it the child is shown feeding a chilly to a caged parrot and training the bird to repeat words: 'Sita-Ram'.

12
The child is taken out for a walk in the early morning. The mother tells the child that he should wake up daily before sunrise, when Shiva and Parvati go round the earth offering blessings. The child is made to walk a few steps every day. Boys are encouraged to play with a ball 'so that their limbs become stronger'. Squirrels, parrots and monkeys are portrayed nibbling at mangoes and, bees sucking honey from flowers.

13
When the child is four or five years old, its tonsure ceremony is performed: the child is seated on bamboo leaves placed over a circular diagram specially painted on the floor for the ceremony. The barber, holding a silver razor and a silver bowl, is shown shaving the child's head while it squats near its mother. A newly married woman and her companion sing auspicious songs. The former is modelled on the prototype of *naina-jogin* of the traditional *kohbar-ghar*. The basketry-platter in which coins were presented to the child by visiting relatives, is then given away to the barber as his fee.

Interestingly, Ganga Devi has throughout been careful to show the child in the scenes before the tonsure ceremony with long hair; only in the following scenes does he have short hair.



13
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 13: The tonsure ceremony of the child.

14
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 14: The child going to school for the first time.

14
The boy is shown going to school carrying his school bag. The father follows him with an umbrella and a pen. Two girls accompany the children to school on the first day, bearing *jhijhia*, earthen lamps, on their heads to ward off the evil eye. A girl born on the same day as the boy is also shown going to school carrying an ink well and a bag.

15
Boys and girls are playing. Two girls play the *jata-jatin*, man and wife, game played at a time of drought. The girls bring water from five different houses and collect it in a mortar. They then catch a frog from nearby, place it inside the mortar, and pound it. The frog is thrown into a neighbour's

courtyard. It is believed that the more the neighbour abuses the more rain will fall that season.

16
Next to the boys are two girls carrying painted clay figures in baskets on their heads. This pertains to the celebration of the popular Maithili festival of Sama-Chakaiva. According to a local legend, Krishna's daughter Sama and son Samb were deeply attached to one another. Sama, who was happily

15
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 15: Boys and girls playing.

16
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 16: Celebration of the festival of Sama-Chakaiva.

married to Chakaiva, was very fond of strolling in the Brindaban forest where many sages practised austerities. Once Chughla, the telltale companion of Sama, falsely complained to Krishna that his daughter was having illicit relations with the sages of Brindaban. On hearing this, an enraged Krishna invoked a curse that Sama and the sages be transformed into birds. The grief of separation caused Sama's husband Chakaiva also to turn into a bird by choice. When Samb, Sama's brother, learnt of his sister's tragic predicament, he underwent severe penance. Krishna, pleased by Samb's austerities granted him a boon which restored Sama, Chakaiva, and the sages into human beings.

In memory of the brother's sacrifice for his sister, the women of Mithila observe the festival of *bhar dutia* (*bhai duj*) on the second day of the bright half of the Hindu month of Kartik. They make painted clay figures of the various characters of the story of Sama-Chakaiva, place them in a basket, and offer them to a field under cultivation or immerse them in a pond.

17-18

These pertain to cultivation, irrigation, and fishing as it is practised in Mithila. Though the Kayasths themselves do not adopt these occupations, Ganga Devi's minute observation and depiction of each detail is remarkable. The images of the farmer with his plough, a man harvesting paddy, a woman setting out paddy plants in an inundated field full of snails, tortoises, frogs, and crabs, a man operating a conventional bamboo device for irrigation, a fisherman catching fish, a fruit vendor collecting water chestnuts, a monkey and a couple of squirrels on a tree eating mangoes while a girl picks the fruit fallen on the ground, a little boy plucking a mango from a branch entering the window of his house, ready to eat it with milk kept in a bowl next to him, are all enchanting vignettes.

19

Here we see the Gauri-Shankar temple. In the arched sanctum of the temple is the image of Ardhanarishvara Mahadev, the androgynous form of Shiva. In front of the image is the *linga*. To the left, a male worshipper approaches the temple with a garland and a basket of flowers, while on the right a female devotee rings the temple bell. *Tulsi*, the sacred basil plant, and Hanuman's banner are on the right.

20

Two forking branches of a large tree separate the temple from a bullock cart approaching the temple bearing a family of devotees. While the man drives the cart, the woman says the rosary and the child carries offerings and a tumbler of water for ablutions; characteristically their faithful dog walks underneath the cart.

21

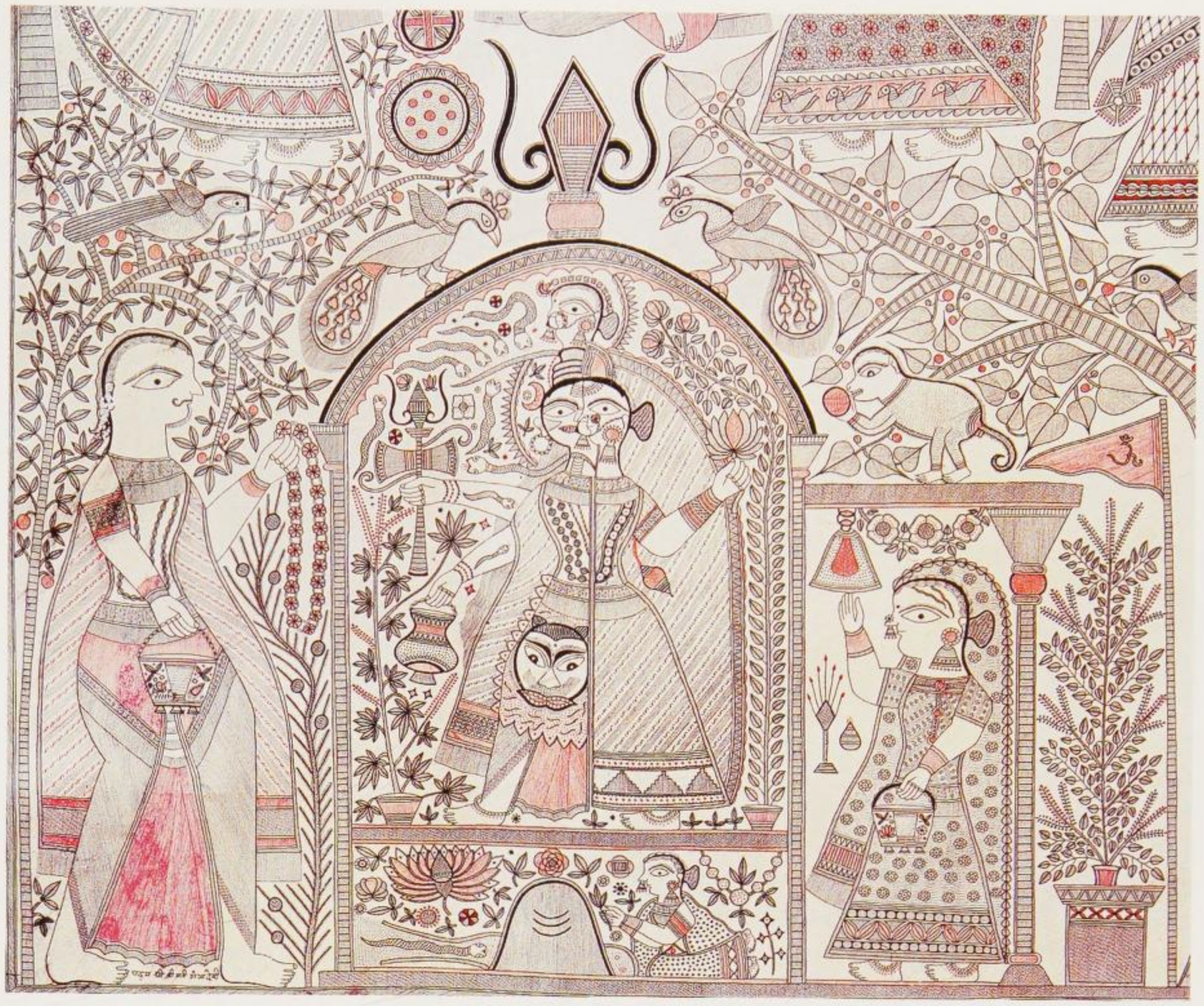
The sequence in this and the following three scenes pertains to the marriage of the male child whose life has been depicted in the painting. The first scene of this sequence depicts the bride's brother and that of the groom jointly lifting the auspicious marriage pot placed on a basketry platter, while the fathers of the bride and the groom grace the occasion with their presence (seated on the extreme right and left). The *padhihar*, priest, carrying a book containing the names of five generations of the bride's and the groom's family, supervises the ceremony.

17
Opposite page
Top
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 17: Scenes of farming and irrigation in rural Mithila.

18
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 18: Scenes from the rural life of Mithila.

19
Right
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 19: Gauri-Shankar temple.

20
Bottom
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 20: Devotees proceeding to Gauri-Shankar temple.



21
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 21: Preparations for the wedding ceremony: lifting of the auspicious pot.

22
The *vedi*, fire-altar, is shown, embellished with a bamboo superstructure and the leaves of mango and banana plants. The officiating priest carries the *Veda* in his left hand and a bowl of roasted paddy in the right. Neatly arranged around the fire-altar are the sacred book, a lotus flower, a few ladles, and two areca nuts on a betel leaf. The sacred fire is lit with five different types of firewood.

The bride and her mother squat on the ground. The bashful bride's eyes are closed and, with folded hands, she prays: 'May God kindly grant me a good husband.' The mother tries to cover her shy daughter's face with her sari as the bridegroom, bedecked in a wedding crown and a veil of flowers, places on the bride's head an areca nut, a golden nose-ring, a piece of silver, a wooden *sogheli* and a piece of ivory, over which he offers *sindurdan*, vermilion. The two hands holding bowls, projecting from behind the bridegroom, are those of a lady standing behind him ready to pour water to wash his *sindur*-smeared hands.

23
Here we see the procession of the bride and the groom seated in their respective palanquins proceeding to the bridegroom's village. The ritual presents of a *thali* and *lota* given by the bride's mother to the bride are depicted below her palanquin. Just above the palanquin, the inoculation of the child is shown; this should have featured before the tonsure ceremony, but Ganga Devi seems to have erroneously depicted it here. Above the last palanquin bearer, the young bride is shown in her pregnancy, signifying that the cycle of life goes on, from birth to birth.

The most striking feature of this painting is its fluid, continuous narrative. Ganga Devi appears to have fully realised that in her *Ramayana* paintings,

22
Left
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 22: The wedding ceremony: the fire-altar (left), offering of vermilion by the bridegroom.

23
Right
The Cycle of Life.
Detail 23: The bridegroom taking away the bride to his home.

where she used definite borders to separate one scene from the next, each scene was virtually a complete episode and an independent picture in its own right, only loosely forming a part of the overall narrative. In 'The Cycle of Life', however, the need was to unfold the chronological events of the story through the medium of space. As the eye moves from the scene of childbirth inside the house to that of an open landscape with a farmer drawing a plough, to the underwater world of fish, crabs, snakes, and tortoises, to a wedding ceremony, it moves through the space, from one scene to the next, but simultaneously the beholder perceives a temporal movement of the central character of the narrative from birth to growing up and marriage. Visually this progression in time is achieved through the use of continuous narration in which the same characters keep reappearing in different scenes, each showing some distinct visual sign of identification, yet each time in the next scene of a progressive episode, thus moving forward in time. By building up a definite sequence of events in this way, the artist achieves, on canvas, a true and lively narrative, forging time with space.

Since the origins of Mithila painting are connected with the images and diagrams of *kohbar* wall paintings and *aripan* floor paintings, they are not even remotely narrative in character.

When Ganga Devi began work on *The Cycle of Life* she had very little in her tradition to fall back upon for pictorial narrative devices. She appears fascinated with entangling figures in a maze of branches and creepers growing from nowhere, using these as dividing elements and a great deal more in her long narrative. The trees and creepers play a dual role of representation and as ornamental dividers. They have tremendous cultural significance in the context in which they occur. The scene depicting the ritual bath of a girl who has just attained puberty and is to be united with her husband, is surrounded by creepers loaded with blossoms and bees, as if illustrating the poet Vidyapati: 'Bees float on the air, inhaling pollen, sucking honey. The God of Love is secretly setting flower-arrows to his bow...'.[3]

The auspiciousness of the tonsure ceremony is heightened by a looming branch that almost forms a halo around the mother, and on which a bird perches, a fish in its beak for good luck. In the same scene, between two women jocularly singing abusive songs addressed to the barber, Ganga Devi places a banana tree, which is considered auspicious for the occasion. The banana tree does not occur anywhere else in the entire painting. The roof of the house in which the mother and child venerate family deities is covered with the customary pumpkin creeper. The grove in which children play has mango trees studded with fruit being picked by squirrels and monkeys, an environment proverbially considered fascinating for Indian children. In the scene showing little girls going to school, spaces are filled with the branches of the tamarind tree, because most of the school-going children in Mithila are reputed to be very fond of eating the tamarind fruit. Since *bilipatra* is sacred to Shiva, a *bili* tree[4] is shown behind the Shiva temple.

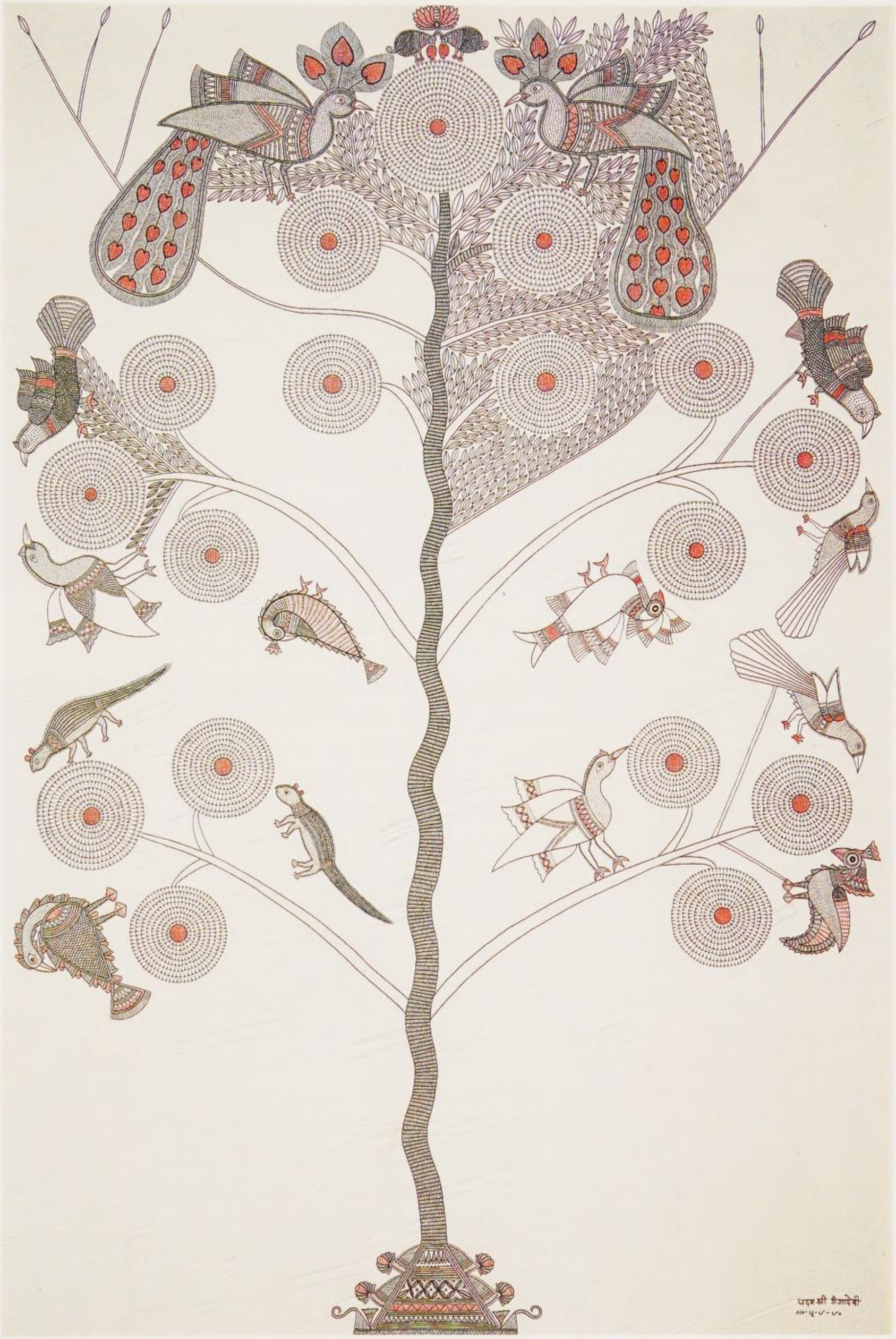
It is common to find a *pipal* tree around village shrines in India, and Ganga Devi has thus carefully placed a large *pipal* in front of the temple. A part of the wedding ceremony being conducted under a *banyan* tree and a blooming creeper forming an arch over the young bride and her mother are further examples of the religeo-cultural relevance of vegetation.

Ganga Devi's innovative use of isolated symbolic images from *kohbar* paintings in relevant but completely different contexts in 'The Cycle of Life' is telling. The old symbols now reappear in new roles, often acting as poetic metaphors creating different aesthetic ideals. *Bidh-bidhata* (a pair of birds with joined beaks), now appears as an isolated image between two pregnant women as an auspicious pair of birds safeguarding children in their embryonic stage. Similarly, the traditional *kohbar* motif of *latpatia suga*, entwined parrots, is carefully placed amidst branches in the new context of a woman giving birth to a child, signifying creation. In the scene depicting the sixth-day ritual of the female child, two stylised geometric images of a bamboo grove, as they would appear in *kohbar*, are placed in the corners; the bamboo grove represents the male and is customarily worshipped by the female at the time of the wedding. The newly married woman singing songs at the tonsure ceremony is none other than *naina-jogin* of the *kohbar-ghar*.

The images of birds, bees, tortoises, fish, pairs of snakes, and lotus flowers, which are as symbolic images of plenty in the *kohbar*, appear in 'The Cycle of Life' in the context of nature as part of the rich tropical landscape and pond life of Mithila, reasserting that Ganga Devi is fully aware that the artist is capable of infusing images with symbolic or natural content at will.

Ride in a Roller Coaster

The Autobiographical Works



The America Series

Until her return to India in 1985 from the United States, where she had been sent under the auspices of the Festival of India (to exhibit her work and to serve as an exhibit herself!), Ganga Devi had rarely done any painting directly concerning her own life or personal experiences. Several other tribal and folk artists and craftspeople had attended the Festival, and most produced and sold there the kind of work they had for many years been producing and selling in India. Despite having visited what Ganga Devi called a 'completely different world', they continued to produce and sell similar works, characterised by their inherited traditions of arts and crafts, if anything infused with a greater element of primitivism to enhance their appeal abroad, years after they returned home. The formula had attained a fair measure of success in the urban art-craft market, and none of them was willing to innovate any further. The makers of these mindless replicas of their own works were content with their commercial success and chose not to risk further experimentation. While most returned home laden with American wrist watches, cameras, radios, tape-recorders, and thermos flasks bartered for their 'Oriental Ware', Ganga Devi came back almost empty-handed but charged by the experience of this 'completely different world'. Later, the experience led to her remarkable 'America Series' of paintings.

The theme of one of these paintings was the 'Festival of American Folk Life', celebrated annually at the Mall of The Smithsonian Institution in Washington D C in the first week of July. At the centre of the painting is the Washington Monument surrounded by American flags. The tower and the crossways leading to it naturally divide the painting into four rectangles. The imagery comprising multi-storeyed motor cars with lotus-shaped wheels (directly stemming from the chariots of her *Ramayana* series); an impersonal hand emerging from a window to hand over a ticket to enable a visitor to climb up the Monument; visitors arriving by a celestial chariot-like bus; pedestrians carrying flowers and conspicuous shopping bags, dressed in half-American, half-Indian clothes – all painted in Ganga Devi's characteristic Mithila style – lends the painting a fantastic quality, as though an American dream painted on a transparent celluloid sheet has been superimposed upon a distant Mithila landscape. The dreamer, Ganga Devi herself, is shown in the elevator at the bottom of the Monument. She stands there, faceless with open arms, holding a lotus, as if poised to fly upwards.

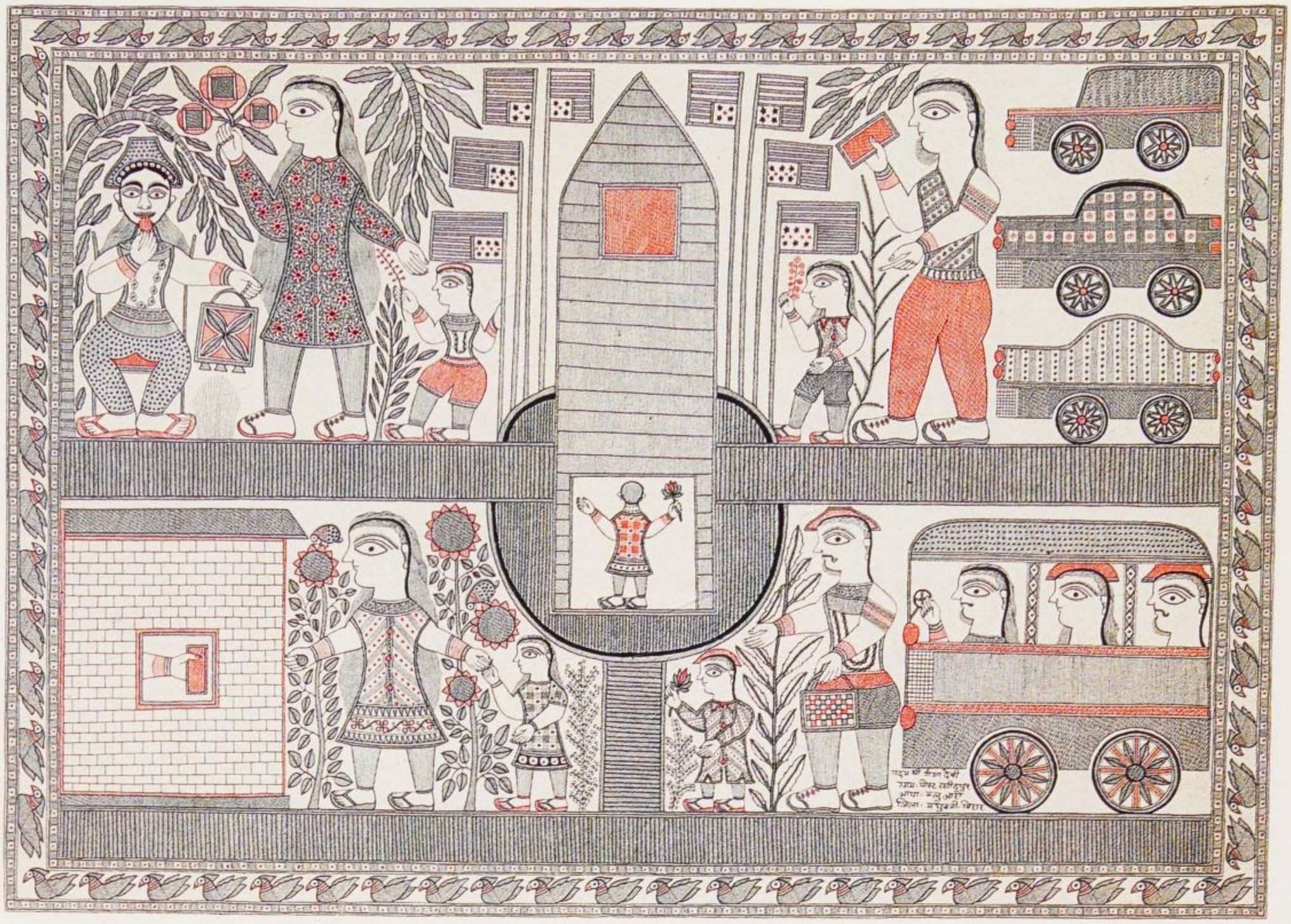
Four years after her return from the United States, describing the painting, Ganga Devi said about the image of a hand emerging from a lone window: 'In America often you do not have a direct contact with the people. Mostly, a hand comes out of a counter or a window, takes away your money and after a while comes out again to hand over your ticket. You do not see the person; you deal with the hand'. Another image of American life that features prominently in this painting was once recalled by her in the following words: 'In America everyone is carrying a shopping bag, men do the domestic work while the women go to offices to work'.

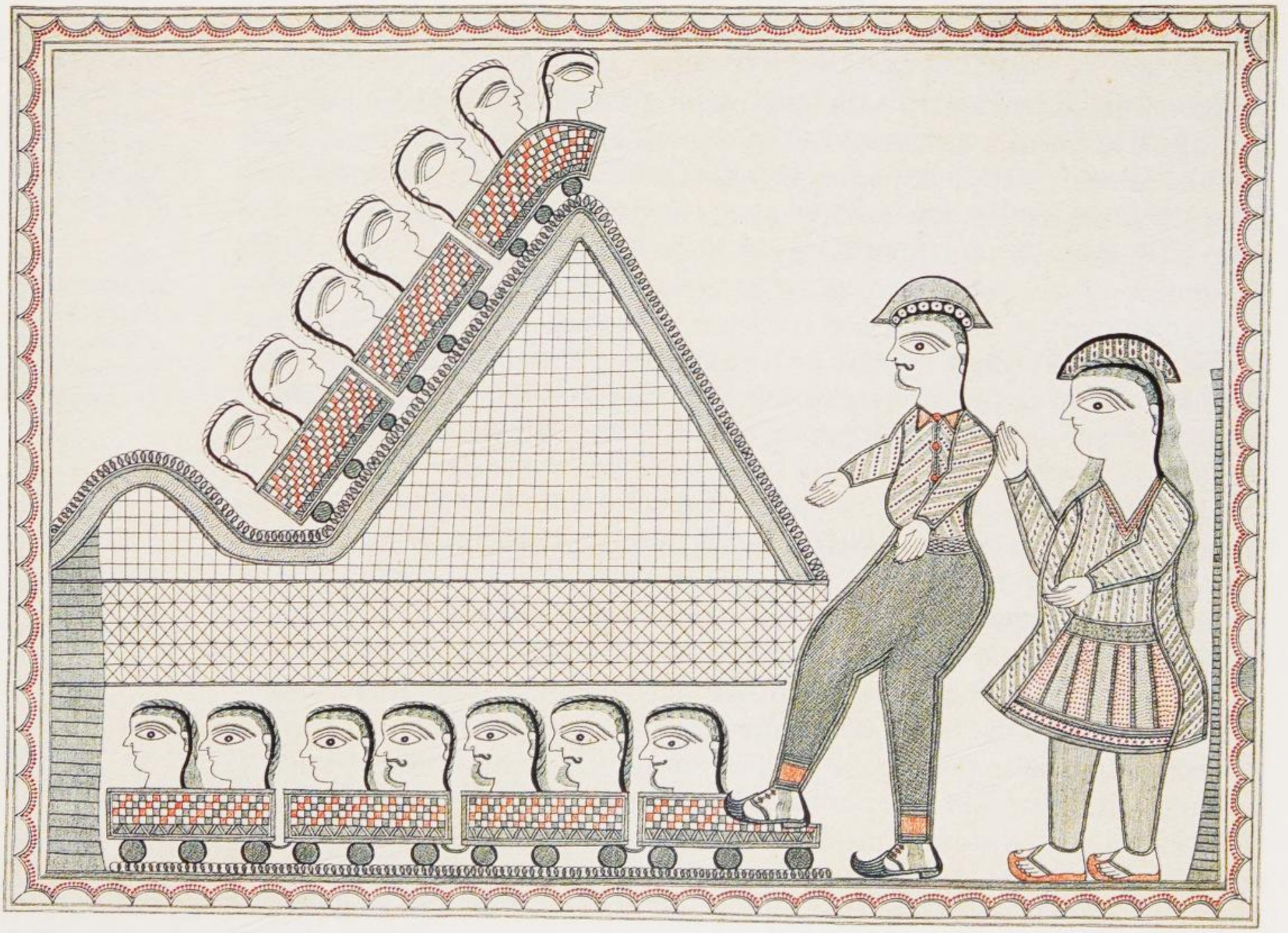
Another painting of her 'America Series' has been entitled by me as: 'Ride in a Roller Coaster'. According to Ganga Devi, along with other artists and

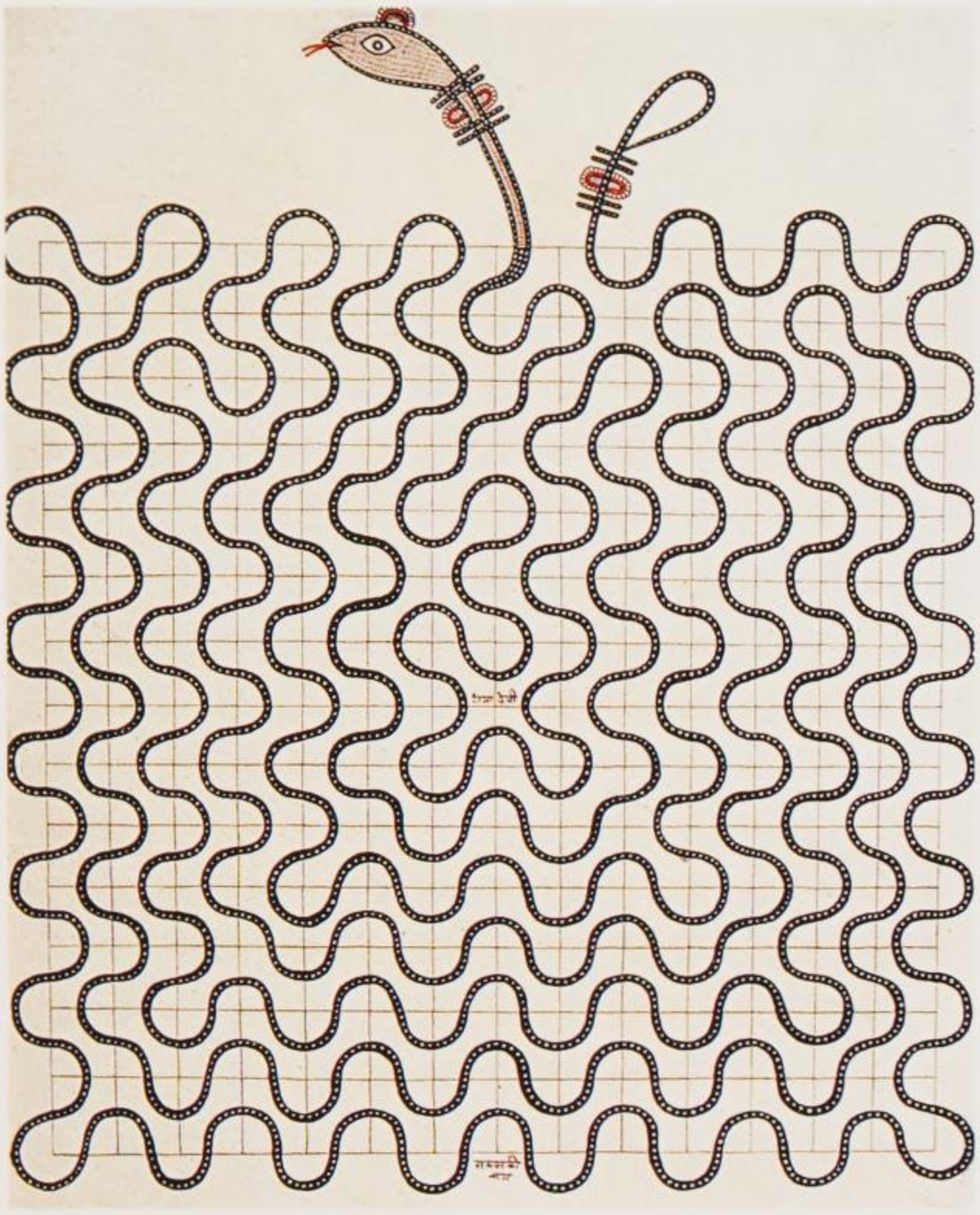
Previous page
The Japan Series 14;
The Sun Flower Tree,
Ganga Devi, 1990,
Pigment on board,
281 cm x 190 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

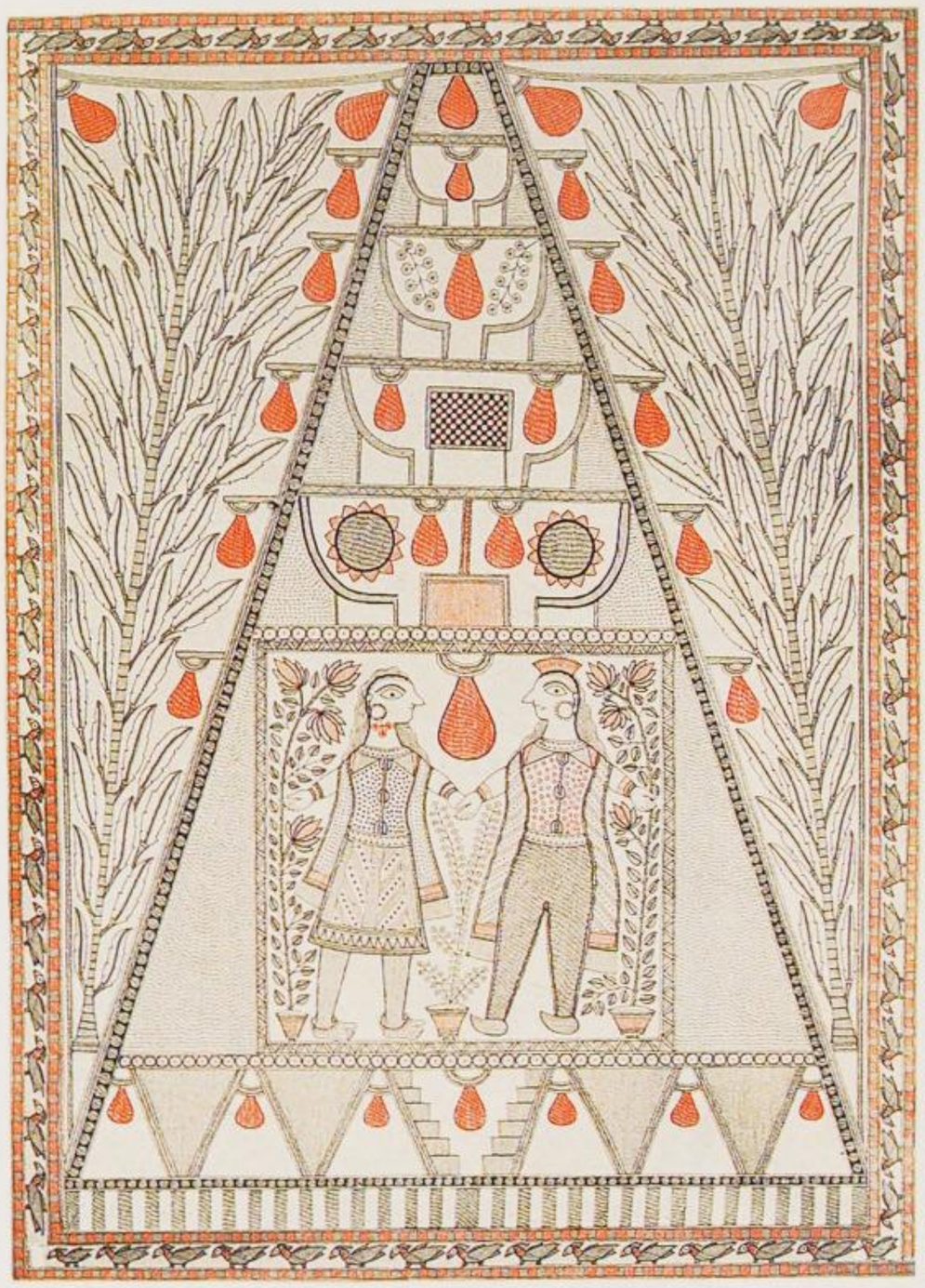
Opposite page
Top
The America Series (1);
Festival of American Folk Life,
Ganga Devi, 1986;
ink on paper,
55 cm x 76 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum, New Delhi,
Acc. No. 87/7194.

Bottom
The America Series (2);
Ride in a Roller Coaster,
Ganga Devi 1986;
ink on paper,
55 cm x 76 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum, New Delhi,
Acc. No. 87/7193.









craftspeople participating in the Festival of India, she was taken to Disneyland by the organisers: there she rode in a roller coaster. The painting is based on her recollection of that thrilling experience.

The gravity railroad, a train with open cars that moves along a high, sharply winding trestle built with steep inclines producing sudden, swift plunges, must have been a unique experience for Ganga Devi. The neat and simplified drawing of the trestle, the way the heads of the passengers rise above the open cars, the way two entrants try to balance themselves as they clutch the moving train, together with the rendering of such details as the wide-open eyes of the riders on the train as it starts, in contrast with the closed eyes (on account of the swift plunge) of those on the other train climbing a steep slope above, are the result of Ganga Devi's faculty of minute observation of detail and its pictorialisation with minimal, deft graphic images.

In describing this painting, she recollected the experience thus: 'For a while, I completely lost the sense of time and space; I did not know in which world I was moving, and what was happening to me. For a long time I looked around for a steam locomotive but did not find one.' She was flabbergasted that there were neither suspension cables nor current connectors above the train. When she got off it, she saw a rack for supply of electricity running along the tracks and, on inquiring, she was told by her guide that the train was powered by the current fed through this rack. She told me, with a sense of pride: 'You can see, in the painting, the running rack under the wheels and along the track.'

Left
Snake diagram for worship on *Nagapanchami* festival; Ganga Devi, 1987-88; ink on paper; 57 cm x 78 cm; collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 88/7716.

Right
Moscow Hotel. Ganga Devi, 1976-78; ink on paper; courtesy: Ethnic Arts Foundation, New York.

In its treatment of space, in its composition, and conspicuous use of large, simplified geometric forms, this is a unique painting. For the first time Ganga Devi did not fill all the empty spaces around the basic composition – no doubt, to accentuate the sense of the train soaring high in the empty sky on a steep trestle. Had the triangular trestle been surrounded by trees or anything else, the sense of sky-piercing height would not have been achieved.

Ganga Devi charmingly bends the front bogey at the peak of the triangle – as though the train was a centipede or a snake. Indeed, it is interesting to compare this painting with one of her traditional snake drawings used for cobra worship on the annual Nagapanchami day. In this drawing the snake has been rendered in such a way that the entire drawing assumes the form of an austere, magical diagram. The exacting pattern of the diagram stems from the symmetrical movement of the convolutions of the snake along the regular grid of squares. The head and tail of the reptile (the beginning and the end of the labyrinthine diagram) spring up in the open space, tilting in opposite directions much in the same way as the head of the first joy-rider sticks out of the complex grid of the trestles in 'Ride in a Roller Coaster'. Undoubtedly, in these two thematically unrelated works, Ganga Devi has recalled the past experience of neat graphic drawing of the ritual diagram of cobra worship, perhaps subconsciously, to give a form to her experience of a ride in a roller coaster. This is also why the latter painting too, has acquired the mystical aura of a sacred diagram.

Ganga Devi had almost never before chosen to paint themes and images completely unrelated to the traditions of painting in Mithila or to those of Maithil mythology, religion, or everyday life. Her journey from the tradition-bound, inherited, collective painting practised in the *kohbar* wall-paintings of her teenage days, through the increasingly innovative and individual expression apparent in the *Ramayana* series and *The Cycle of Life* begins to come full circle in her 'America Series': here departure from tradition attains a climax of sorts at the level of theme and imagery, while stylistic certitude continues to prevail in the drawing and conceptualisation of figures and images.

She had never dealt with the day-to-day images of contemporary life – motor cars, flags, ticket booths, roller coasters, elevators, people carrying shopping bags, etc. The world in which they existed appeared to her unrealistic, imaginary, and fantastic, and therefore 'mythological' in another sense. As she was pictorialising these images of a 'completely different world', she was unconsciously mythologising the 'reality'. The painted images of modern life were, therefore, becoming removed from any recognisable or familiar context and were becoming transformed into images of fairy tales of our times, narrated in another age, to another audience, in another land.

Pilgrimage to Badrinath

In 1976 Ganga Devi was presented the President of India's National Award for Master Craftspersons.[1] On this happy occasion she had resolved in her

mind to go on a pilgrimage of Badrinath and Kedarnath in the Himalayas. She went there in May 1977. Being a deeply religious woman, this pilgrimage proved to be a milestone in her life. It was only after ten years, between 1987 and 1988, that Ganga Devi did a painting based on her memory of this pilgrimage. There were two reasons for her having done so at this juncture in her life.

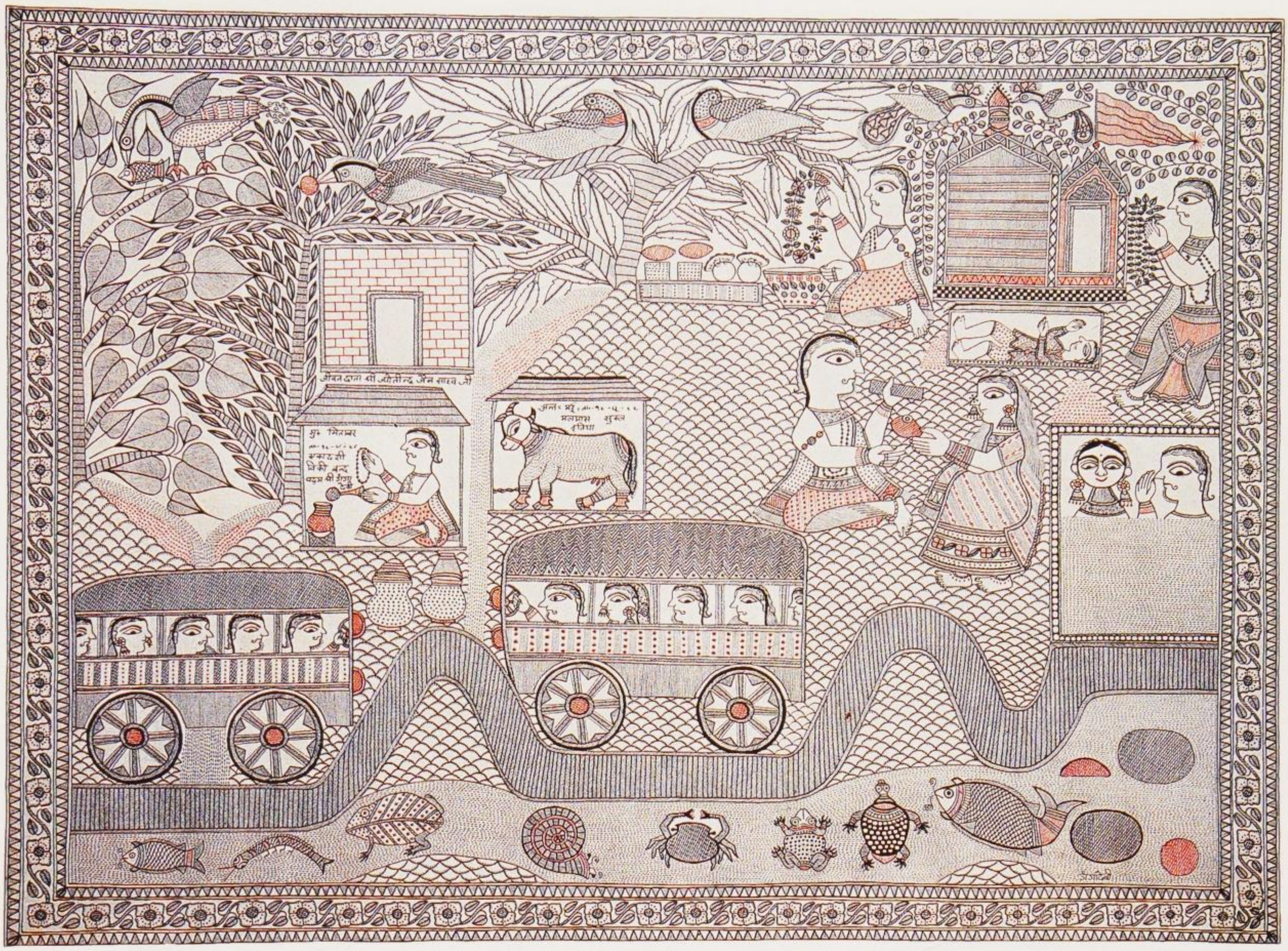
In 1987 Ganga Devi was struck by cancer and underwent treatment for the next three years in Delhi where she did the painting. This was the most tragic and miserable phase of her life. She was in a mood to wind up loose ends and prepare for death and the life after. She had already ordered the drafting of her will, had made a list of her meagre possessions and had nominated the person who should perform her last rites. It was in such a state of mind that Ganga Devi painted her 'Pilgrimage to Badrinath'. As a pious Hindu woman facing death, she developed an acute desire to visit Badrinath and Kedarnath and thereby end her life in a holy place. But this was not possible, given her ill-health and continuous need for medication. She thus recreated the experience of her pilgrimage in a painting; the act of painting gave her a sense of self-purification.

The other reason why Ganga Devi painted 'Pilgrimage to Badrinath' at this stage of her artistic career was that she was now adept in handling themes from day-to-day life and contemporary scenes and images in her work – a process that had begun in 'The Cycle of Life' and had matured in the 'America Series'. This painting was a prelude to what was yet to be thought of and painted: 'The Cancer Series'.

'Pilgrimage to Badrinath' is an emotional recollection, executed by an artist possessed of the deep faith of a devotee and endowed with graphic visual memory combined with exquisite draughtsmanship employed to generate reductive imagery – symbolic and representational rather than direct and realistic.

At the bottom of the painting is the river Alakananda – Ganga, teeming with frogs, snails, turtles, fish, and crabs. Each creature is drawn with great affection and minimal detail, calculated to capture its essential characteristics. Along with the river is a long, winding road on which buses carrying pilgrims from Haridwar to Badrinath and back. Adjacent to the buses is the Joshimath bus depot. The brick structure is the rest-room for the bus drivers, and the hut below is a place where pilgrims cook their food. The cow belongs to the owner of the roadside tea shop.

Towards the right and in the background, is the sacred complex of Badrinath. The principal shrine is on the top right corner. In front of the shrine is the priest's hut, where a pilgrim rests. On the right, a devotee brings a garland of *tulsi*, basil, to the presiding deity of the shrine. To the left of the temple, a gardener sells coconuts, flowers, copper rings, and sweets as offerings to the shrine. In the foreground a woman offers *guptadana*, a secret donation, of money placed inside a hollow coconut. On the extreme right is the Taptakunda, hot water springs, where a couple bathes. Sacred *pipal* and *ashoka* trees are shown proliferating in the complex.[2] The rocky surface of the ground, shown by a fish-scale pattern, is intercepted by mountain springs and occasional piles of snow.



Pilgrimage to Badrinath; Ganga Devi, 1987-88, ink on paper, 50 cm x 70 cm; private collection, New Delhi.

After completing the painting, to my astonishment, she inscribed it for me.[3] I felt honoured and was deeply moved. She asked me if I had been to Badrinath. When I said no, she told me that by looking at the painting, I would get the same religious merit as one who had actually been on a pilgrimage.[4]

The Cancer Series

From September 1987 till her death on 21 January 1991, Ganga Devi stayed mostly at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, except for a few weeks at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, two trips of 15 days and three months, respectively, to Japan and a two-months' stay in Rasidpur, Madhubani. During this period, she did four autobiographical paintings narrating her experience of contracting cancer and its treatment. The most unique feature of these paintings is that Ganga Devi herself, the principal character in the narrative, appears repeatedly. This may perhaps be the only example of autobiographical paintings done by any artist belonging to the tribal or rural traditions of India. In this sense, too, the transformation of Ganga Devi from a collective tradition to individual expression assumes great significance; and she emerges as a remarkable, individual artist reflecting a contemporary spirit in her work.

Since the events of her life narrated in the paintings unfolded sequentially, it is possible to arrange them chronologically and thus discuss them one at a time.

The Village Quack
In this work Ganga Devi deals with the episode of her having fallen into the hands of a quack in Madhubani.

The painting (56 cm x 78 cm) is divided into two horizontal rows, each being further split into three registers. The sequence of narrative runs from left to right. In the first register of the upper row Ganga Devi is shown kneading dough for the day's meal inside her house, a brick structure. Adjacent to the house is the installation of a *tulsi* shrine. As she kneads dough, she feels pain in her breast. The following scene shows her talking to the homeopath of Rasidpur, who has just handed her a tube of ointment.

In the next register Ganga Devi is shown proceeding to Madhubani for treatment. The first register on the left, in the lower row, shows her being examined by a doctor in a Madhubani hospital. In the next scene the same doctor is shown meeting her outside the hospital and advising her to arrange for a large sum of money for her private medical examination and subsequent operation. In the last scene she is being examined by the doctor at his house. (The purpose of examining her at home was to extort money from her which he could not have done in a public hospital).

Brother's Death
This painting pertains to Ganga Devi's visit to her village Chatara, to meet her brothers before proceeding to Delhi for treatment. On reaching Chatara she was faced with the sudden death of her elder brother Baldev Laldas, leading to the postponement of her visit to Delhi.

The painting is divided into two horizontal rows. In the upper row, on the left, Ganga Devi's brother, severely ill, is shown arriving in a bridal litter. He had returned very ill from Nepal; alighting from a bus in Sitamadhi he was unable to proceed to Chatara because of heavy floods, and the non-availability of any other conveyance resulted in his being brought to Chatara in a bride's litter procured from a house in Sitamadhi.

On the right, his dead body lies on the floor. The deceased holds the tail of a cow, in keeping with the local Hindu belief that a cow donated to a Brahmin priest would help the deceased to cross the dreadful river Vaitarni in the course of his journey to the other world. Next to the dead body, Ganga Devi is shown weeping as the Brahmin priest mutters stanzas from *Bhagavad Gita*. In the lower row, as the ritual of reading passages from *Garuda Purana* proceeds, over the following few days, Dr Hemachandra, the neurosurgeon from Darbhanga, happens to visit Ganga Devi in Chatara and scolds her for not having gone to Delhi, despite the seriousness of her disease. In the last scene, Ganga Devi is shown resting at home in Chatara.

Journey to Delhi
This painting relates to Ganga Devi's long and tedious journey from Chatara to Madhubani, and from there to Delhi via Patna amidst heavy rain and floods.

Opposite page
Top
'The Cancer Series': 1;
The Village Quack,
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
56 cm x 78 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum., New Delhi,
Acc. No. 89/7760(2).
Upper half (from left):
Ganga Devi kneading
dough; talking to a
homeopath; proceeding
to Madhubani for
treatment.
Lower half (from left):
Ganga Devi being
medically examined in a
Madhubani hospital;
being advised by a doctor
for a private examination
at his residence; being
privately examined.

Bottom
'The Cancer Series': 2;
Brother's Death,
Ganga Devi, 1988-89,
ink on paper,
56 cm x 78 cm;
collection: Crafts
Museum, New Delhi
Acc. no. 89/7776(1).
Upper half (from left):
Ganga Devi's sick brother
is brought home in a
bridal litter; the brother
dies.
Lower half (from left):
Ritual reading of *Garuda
Purana*; Ganga Devi
resting at home.

गंगादेवी

सीता
गंगादेवी

The first scene in the top corner shows Ganga Devi bidding a tearful farewell to Sahdev Laldas, one of her brothers, and his wife, Sunaina Devi. In the next scene Ganga Devi, her sister-in-law, and the latter's child walk through the rain and floods to reach the village of Dhagjari to catch a bus for Madhubani. In the following register, Sajjan, her younger brother's son, carries her luggage.

The lower panel of this painting represents an intense recollection of a stormy and rainy night, charged with layers and layers of dark clouds and lightning. The bus heading for Patna was diverted to Goraul railway station by the police as all traffic on the Patna road was closed. On one side, the police are shown ordering a diversion of the bus, and on the other Ganga Devi is shown travelling by train from Goraul to Hajipur, eventually to reach Patna.

The Cancer Ward

This painting is again divided into two horizontal rows and six registers altogether. It depicts Ganga Devi's arrival in Delhi and her treatment at the AIIMS. The top left register shows her squatting on the floor at the Crafts Museum and handing over a slip of paper from Dr Hemachandra to Anil Aggarwal, an employee of the Museum, indicating possible breast cancer. The next shows Ganga Devi talking to me as the Director of the Museum. In the following scene she is being taken by the official Museum jeep to the AIIMS. The first scene in the lower row, on the left shows her being examined by an AIIMS doctor. In the next scene she is given blood transfusion as O.P. Jain, one of her well-wishers, hands over a sum of Rs. 1,000 to her for her treatment. The last scene shows her X-Ray examination.

The peculiarity of these four autobiographical paintings is that every character depicted in them is an identifiable person who is either related to Ganga Devi or has played a role in her life. Though no attempt at realistic portraiture is made, Ganga Devi has tried to characterise each individual with a few striking features, such as a beard, moustache, hairstyle, clothes, etc. For example the quack in the first painting is shown in the typically Muslim clothes of the region; the depiction of me in the last painting is with my characteristic shawl wrapped around the shoulder. Ganga Devi also pointed out that she herself was identifiable in the paintings by a mole on her chin and tattoo marks on her forearms.

During her prolonged illness, Ganga Devi had to often lie flat on her back, either when she went for medical check-ups or when periodically hospitalised. Such situations conditioned her to stare at the ceiling of the hospital room for hours on end. In these moments of utter loneliness she saw ceiling fans and the typical hospital lights. These two objects – her constant companions at a time of prolonged pain – finally became the symbols of boundless agony and unending boredom. They are prominently depicted in several registers of her 'Cancer Series' of paintings. The doctor's handbag, spittoons placed under the patient's beds, temperature charts hanging on the walls and the painful moments of being given injections or blood transfusion, or measuring blood-pressure had become a part of Ganga Devi's life during these years and have found obvious expression in this series of her paintings.

Opposite page
Top
'The Cancer Series': 3; Journey to Delhi, Ganga Devi, 1988-89; ink on paper, 56 cm x 78 cm, collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 89/7760(1). Upper half (from left): Ganga Devi bidding farewell to a brother; accompanied by relatives proceeds to Dhagjari village; Sajjan, her younger brother's son carries her luggage. Lower half (from left): Ganga Devi travelling by train from Goraul to Hajipur on a rainy and stormy night as the bus carrying her was stopped by the police on account of floods; walking through floods.

Bottom
'The Cancer Series': 4; The Cancer Ward, Ganga Devi, 1988-89, ink on paper, 56 cm x 78 cm; collection: Crafts Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. 89/7776(2). Upper half (from left): Ganga Devi handing over her medical papers; talking to the author; proceeding to the All India Institute for Medical Sciences. Lower half (from left): Ganga Devi being examined by a doctor; receiving monetary help from a well-wisher; undergoing an X-Ray test.

जगदेवी

जगदेवी

The Japan Series; *Radha and Krishna*; Ganga Devi, 1982; pigment on board, 205 cm x 267 cm; collection: Mithila Museum, Niigata, Japan.

In 'The Cancer Series', Ganga Devi resorts to reported story-telling, selecting for depiction only those incidents of her cancer days which had deeply affected her, whether as a consequence of the sheer physical pain caused by the disease or those situations which were imposed upon her by her social circumstances and the calamities of nature. She looks at the entire sequence of events from outside: an artist seeing herself as the principal character in the drama of her own life. It is interesting that Ganga Devi establishes the typology of her own image in the first painting of the series as a young married woman wearing a prominent *tika* on her forehead as a sign that her husband is alive; a mole on her forehead, chin and two hands; wearing intricately patterned saris and elaborate necklaces, wristlets and anklets – an idealised image of herself as a young, beautiful woman. Once

the type is cast, she uses this recognisable image of herself as a character in the slowly unfolding narrative of her life. She had effectively used this method in her *Ramayana* painting where she had conceptualised the image of Sita as a tall, slender, and bashful woman in an initial panel, and then had used the type, like vocabulary, throughout to tell her story. Ganga Devi adored Sita as an ideal of Indian womanhood, and perhaps for that reason portrayed herself as a minor image of Sita.

It is also a remarkable feature of Mithila painting that all male and female characters are invariably shown in their youth, Ganga Devi's own portraiture being no exception. One reason for this is that the pictorial typology of the male and female figures was modelled on that of gods and goddesses who were supposed to be perpetually youthful.

The Japan Series

During the period of treatment for her cancer, between 1988-90, Ganga Devi visited Japan twice. In her combined stay of three months at the Mithila Museum at Niigata, she did about a dozen paintings which are a part of the Museum's permanent collection, and proved to be her last works.

The two most remarkable paintings of her Japan Series are those she entitled: 'The Clove Tree' and the 'The Sun Flower Tree'. Significantly, both the works are incomplete but are still signed as though Ganga Devi had known that she would never return to Japan to complete them. Ganga Devi had never devoted an entire painting to a tree before, although she had depicted similar trees in the wall-paintings of the *kohbar-ghar*. For Ganga Devi there was no going back from the new themes, imagery, forms and innovative methods of rendering them, a process which had begun with 'The Cycle of Life' and had continued in her 'America Series' and 'Cancer Series'. 'The Clove Tree' and 'The Sun Flower Tree' are a part of this search for new visual experience and desire to decontextualise images from the traditional painting of Mithila. Both the trees are completely imaginary. Their forms derive much from the convention of rendering them in the wall-paintings of Mithila rather than from their natural form. 'The Clove Tree' has several stylised floral discs comprising concentric circles of cloves – a form in which cloves don't grow on a tree. 'The Sun Flower Tree' looks very similar to 'The Clove Tree', with the exception of minor variations in detailing petals and leaves. There is a celebratory mood about the 'The Sun Flower Tree', with birds and squirrels lustily engaged in nibbling the flowers. The empty white space of this incomplete painting radiates light in which peacocks, parrots, and squirrels seem to be bathing – intoxicated with joy. In all probability, Ganga Devi discovered, in these painting the painter's pleasure of creating empty spaces, much against her lifelong belief that 'emptiness is tantamount to infecundity'. Perhaps in these last paintings the artist in Ganga Devi took clear precedence over the believer, impelling her to leave them incomplete, thereby relishing the discovery of pictorial space. As a token of formal completion she just put her signature in the corner.

'Indian Train', '*naga mandala*', 'Underwater Life', '*shankh aripan*', 'lion',

Following pages

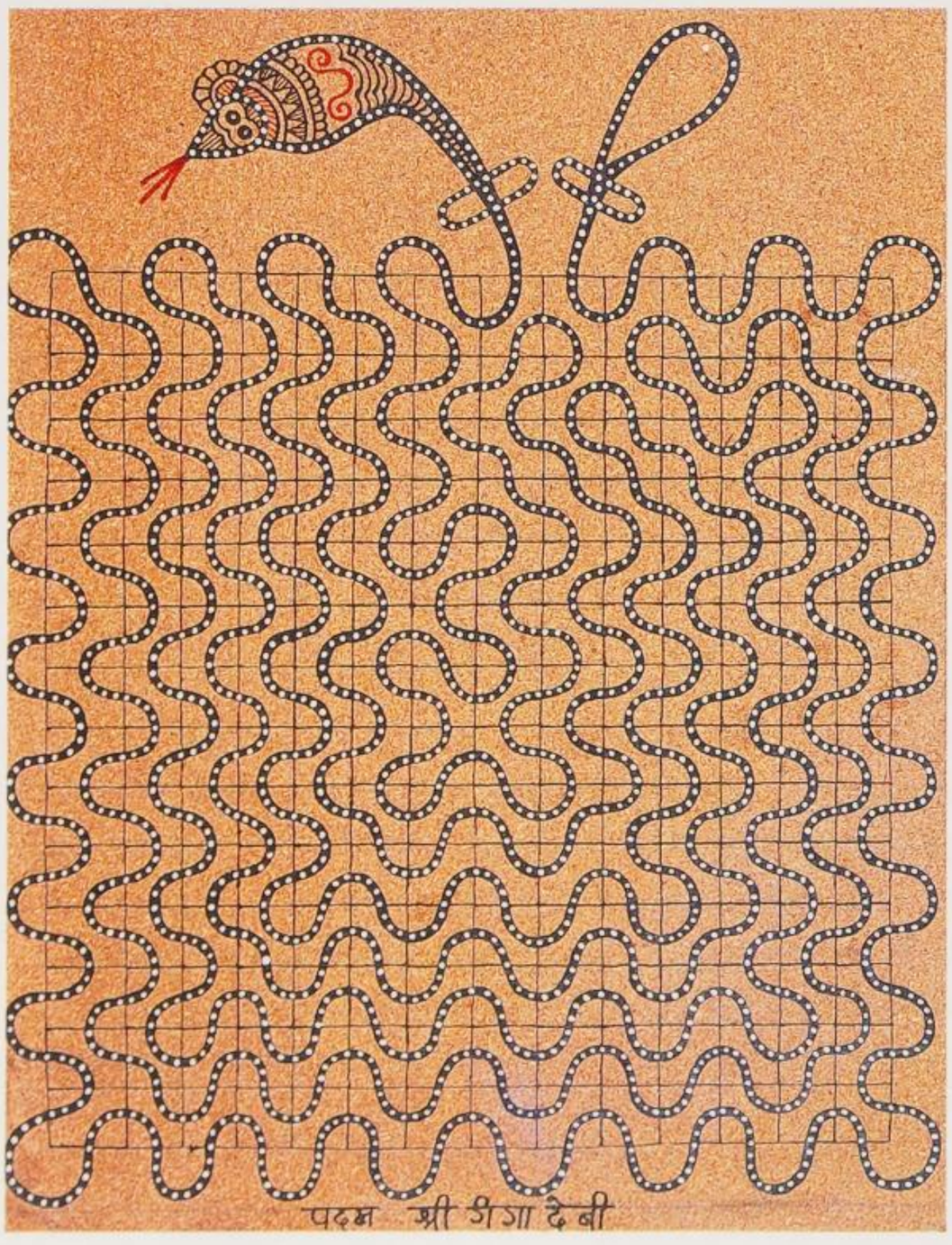
Top
The Japan Series;
Cow;
Ganga Devi, 1988;
pigment on board,
44 cm x 61 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

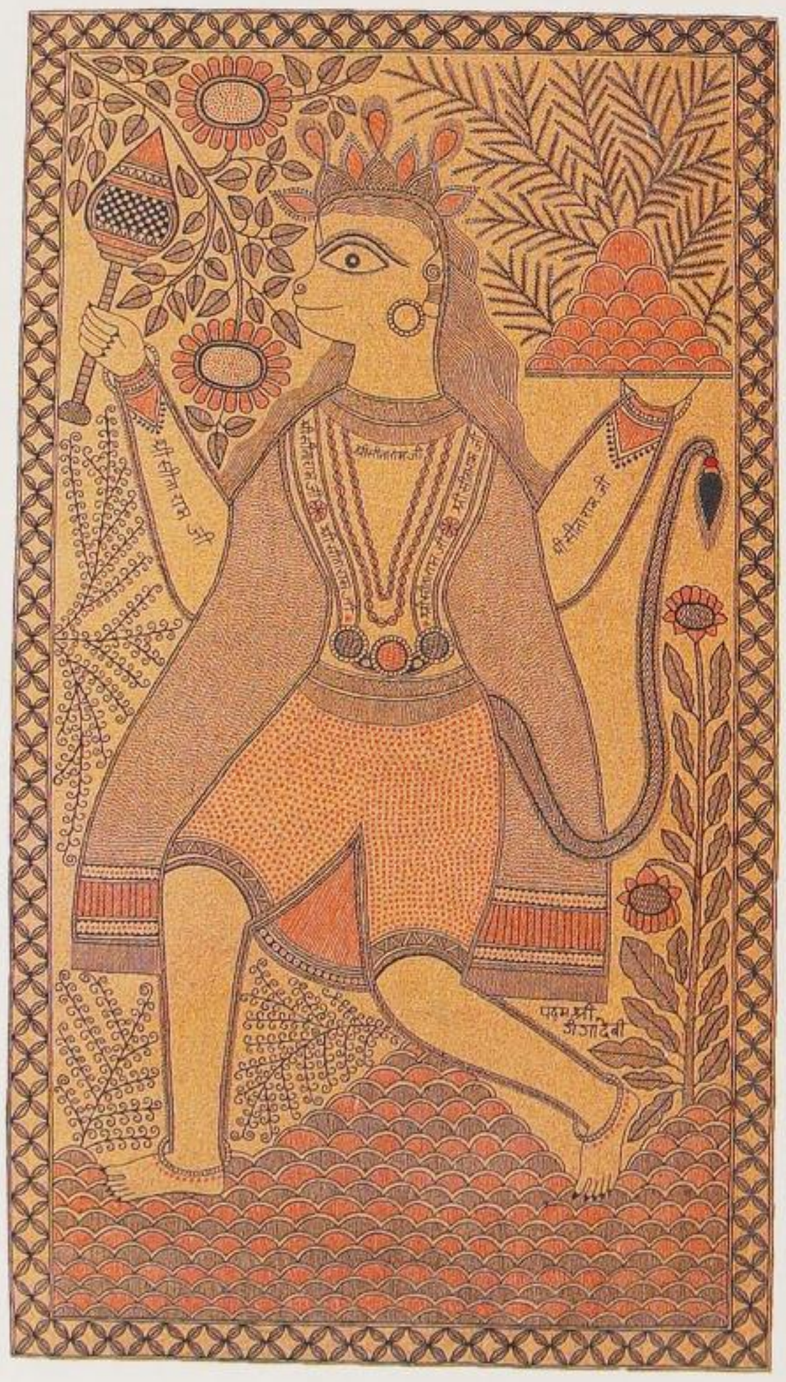
Left
The Japan Series;
Snake Diagram,
Ganga Devi, 1988;
pigment on board,
44 cm x 61 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Right
The Japan Series;
Hanuman,
Ganga Devi, 1988;
pigment on board,
140 cm x 81 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

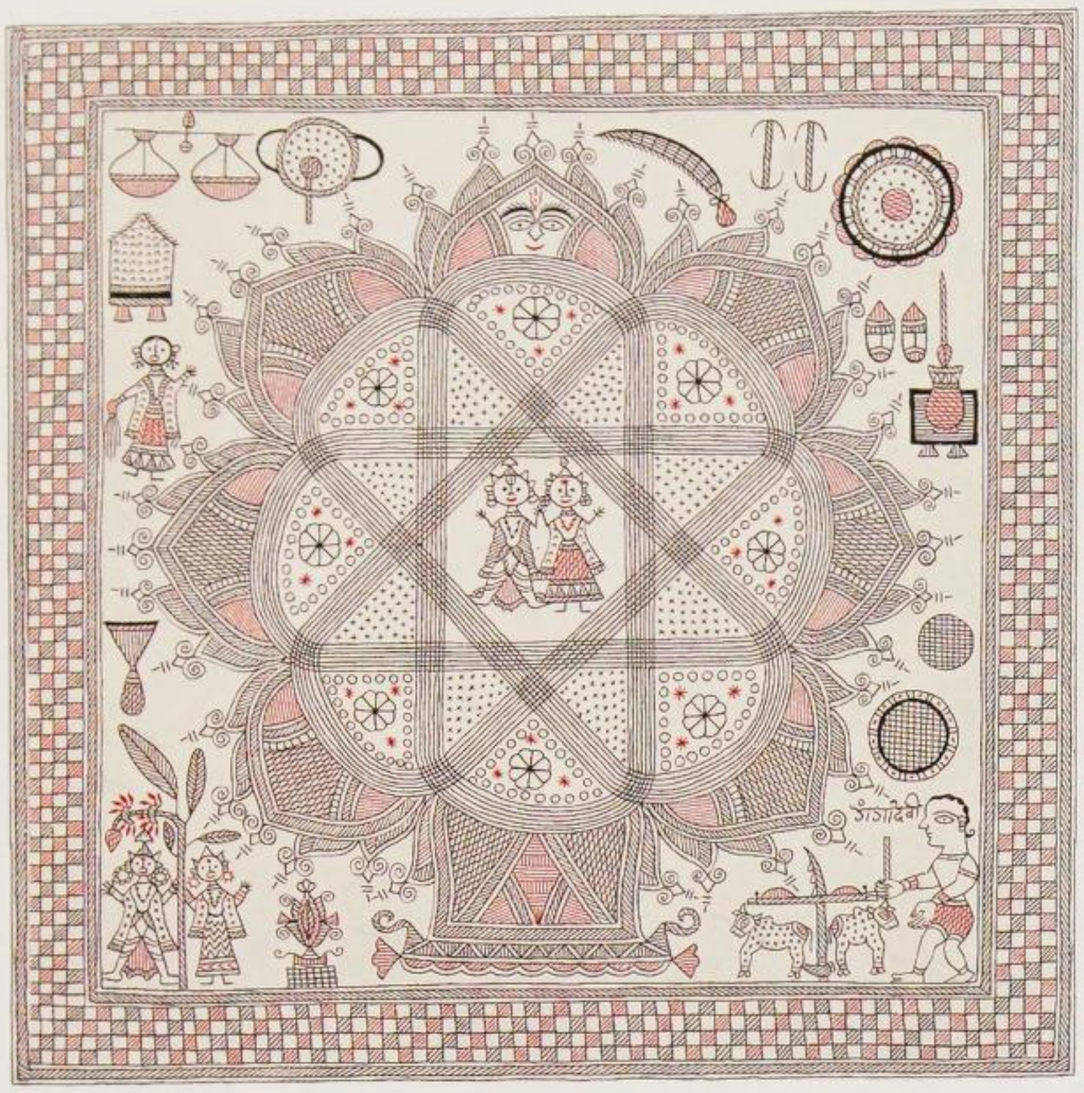
Far right
The Japan Series;
Shiva-Shakti,
Ganga Devi, 1990;
ink on paper,
37 cm x 27 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

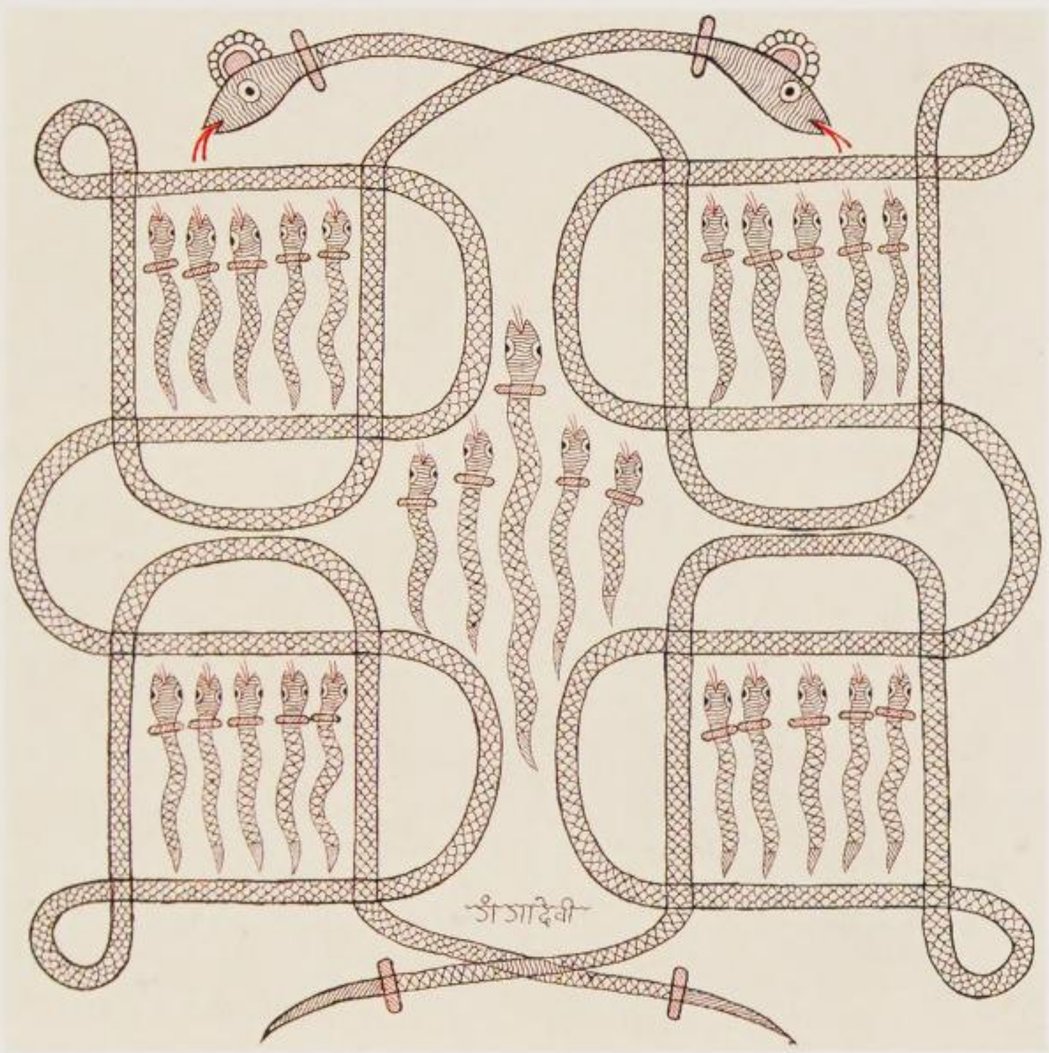
पद्मश्री
गंगादेवी


पद्म श्री गंगा देवी


पद्मश्री
गंगादेवी

पद्म श्री गंगा देवी





'tiger', 'Radha and Krishna', and '*bans*', forming part of Japan Series, are among the finest examples of Ganga Devi's draughtsmanship.

Anyone looking at Ganga Devi's work would be struck by her remarkable draughtsmanship. Her concern for purity of line prevented her from using a ruler even when drawing close parallel lines of long borders of large paintings. Her line was like a flowing stream – smooth and gentle, but nevertheless confident of its predetermined destiny. The flow was unbroken and there has never been a work showing a sign of her going over a line a second time. Ganga Devi was meticulous, almost indulgent, in drawing the details of creepers, trees, carts, locomotives, and especially patterns on people's clothing, but her highly animated rendering of characters and

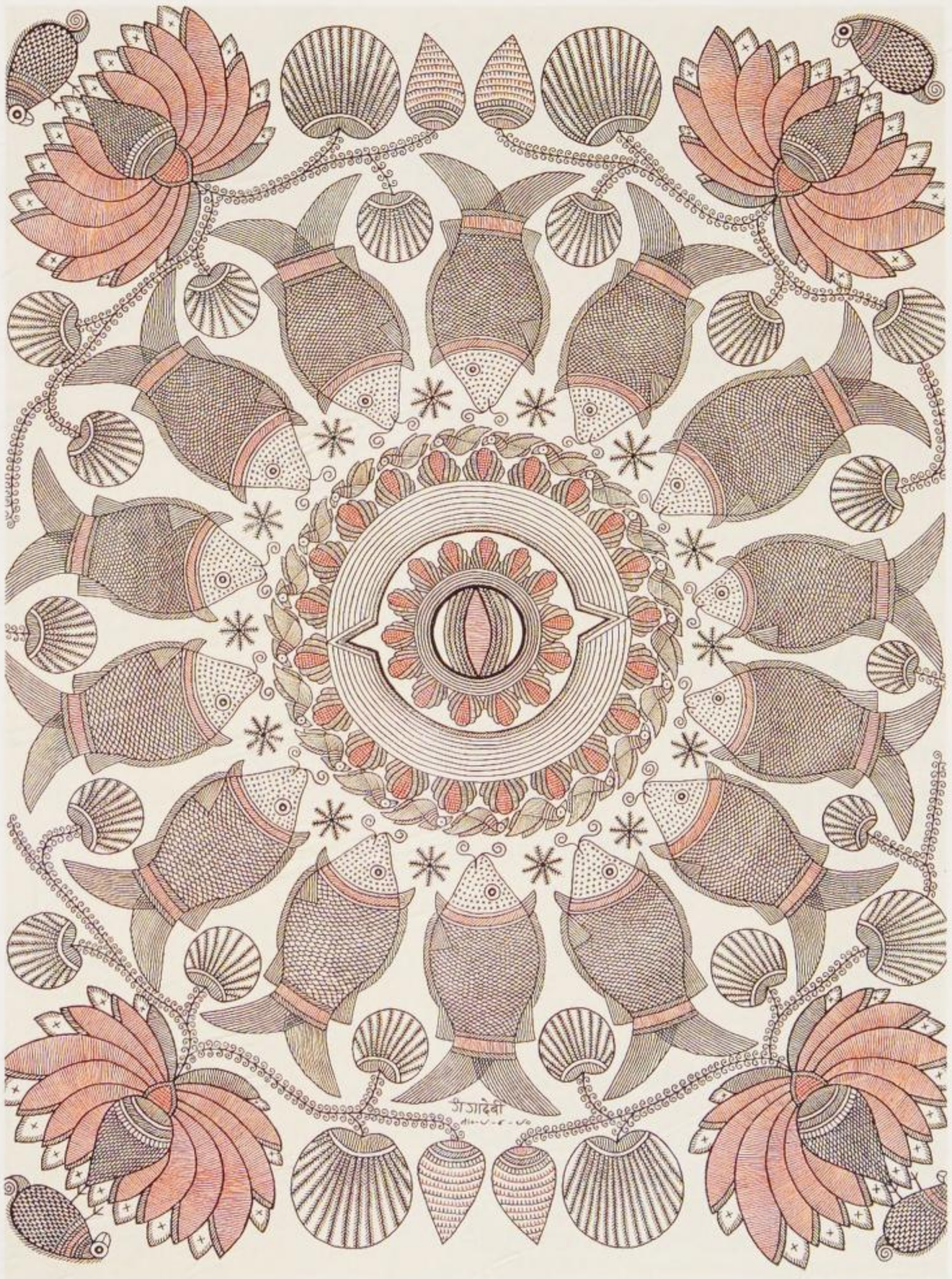
Opposite page

Far top
The Japan Series;
aripan, a ritual floor
painting done on
Ganga Devi, 1990;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 32 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Left top
The Japan Series;
Bamboo Grove,
Ganga Devi, 1989,
ink on paper,
36 cm x 36 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Far bottom
The Japan Series;
Snake Diagram,
Ganga Devi, 1989;
ink on paper,
35 cm x 35 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Bottom
The Japan Series;
Underwater Life,
Ganga Devi, 1989;
ink on paper,
34 cm x 34 cm,
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.



Top
The Japan Series;
Bride and Bridegroom,
Ganga Devi, 1990;
pigment on board,
108 cm x 140 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

Bottom
The Japan Series;
aripan,
Ganga Devi, 1990;
pigment on board,
139 cm x 108 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

The Japan Series;
Tiger,
Ganga Devi, 1990;
ink on paper,
32 cm x 40 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.

situations prevented her work from becoming laboured exercises.

In the traditional wall-paintings of Mithila, the act of drawing has always been separate from that of painting. An outline was first drawn and colours filled in subsequently; the whole tradition of painting in Mithila may therefore be described as 'coloured drawings'. When paper was introduced in Mithila as surface for painting, a number of women painters resorted to fine drawing in red and black inks simply because their tradition was rooted in drawing rather than in painting.

In its formal aspect Ganga Devi's work is about exploring the boundless possibilities of drawing in line – a feature that is as a much link with her ethnic past as it is a point of departure.

Notes

The Life of Ganga Devi

1
Ancient Indian literature is replete with references to the religious merit that accrues through the act of committing suicide at Prayaga. For a summary of these, see P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona, 1973), IV, pp. 606-13.

2
The Marketing and Service Extension Centre, Madhubani, functioning under the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) Government of India, Ministry of Textiles, is popularly known among the women artists of Mithila as 'Madhubani Office'.

3
Yves Vequaud, a French national and author of *Women Painters of Mithila* (London, 1977) was an important patron and buyer of Mithila paintings in the early 1970s. He was popularly known as Bihko Fransi; Bihko being the Maithili pronunciation of his surname and Fransi meaning Frenchman.

4
Refers to Hari Prasad Misra, then Assistant Director of the Marketing and Service Extension Centre, Madhubani, popularly known as 'Madhubani Office'.

5
Pupul Jayakar, the then Chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board (established in 1952) and one of the greatest admirers of Mithila painting, was also a great supporter of the women painters of Mithila.

6
Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, had personally known some of the women painters of Mithila, including Sita Devi and Ganga Devi. It has been said that she was widely responsible for popularising Mithila painting. At the time of droughts, which were frequent in Mithila, it was customary for the Government to provide relief to the drought-stricken people in return for which they were expected to crush stone for road construction. Indira Gandhi apparently ordered that instead of this mode of employment, the women of Mithila should be provided with paper to paint on and that the paintings should be marketed through the All India Handicrafts Board.

7
This is a literal translation of a Hindi phrase used by Ganga Devi to mean 'my confidante is the Chairman'. Here 'Chairman' refers to Pupul Jayakar who was then chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board.

8
'*Gram Jhanki*' was an exhibition on the theme of Rural India, organised by the artist Sankho Chaudhury at the India International Trade Fair at Pragati Maidan in New Delhi in 1972. The exhibition site together with some additional land was subsequently made available to the Crafts Museum. Several years after the Museum had been set up, it continued to be popularly known as '*Gram Jhanki*', or the 'Village Complex'.

9
The Office of the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts was established in 1980 with a view to developing handicrafts, both in terms of commerce and culture. It functions as the executive body of the All India Handicrafts Board under the Ministry of Textiles, Govt of India.

10
Padmashri is one of the most coveted national honours conferred upon an individual by the President of India for his or her distinguished contribution in any given field.

11
Here 'Patna Office' stands for the Upendra Maharathi Institute of Industrial Design, Patna, Bihar.

12
Nand Kumar Jha, then Assistant Director, Marketing and Service Extension Centre, Madhubani, Bihar.

13
See 8 above.

14
Anil refers to Anil Aggarwal, who then worked as Gallery Assistant at the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.

15
Tokio Hasegawa, the founder of the Mithila Museum in Niigata, Japan. Ganga Devi had developed a warm personal relationship with him and his family, and in one of her press interviews she described him as her son.

16
After Ganga Devi was honoured with the *Padmashri*, she used it as a title before her name and usually signed herself 'Padmashri Ganga Devi'.

Traditions of Painting in Mithila

1
V. Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila* (Allahabad, 1979), p. 10.

2
Ibid., p. 8.

3
E. H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (Chicago, 1985), p. 95.

4
For a formidable study of this aspect, see Catherine B. Asher and Thomas R. Metcalf (eds.), *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past* (New Delhi, 1994).

5
James Clifford, 'The Others: Beyond the "Salvage" Paradigm', in *Third Text*, no. 6 (London, 1989).

6
The application of vermilion over the impressions of the palm (most rudimentary form of *kohbar*) further testifies that the primary function of the *kohbar-ghar* is related to offering vermilion in the central parting of the bride's hair. It is most likely that the custom of representing the *kohbar* in the form of palm impressions was the earliest form practised both by the Kayasths and Brahmins of Mithila.

7
What are known as 'handicrafts' today were in reality inseparable components of the composite traditions of culture in which painting and sculpture were deeply integrated with the annual cycle of fairs and festivals. Because they had an 'economic angle' the entire issue of 'handicrafts' was placed under the strategy of 'development'. Unfortunately, under the category of 'handicrafts' systematic development and trade in ritual paintings and divine images led to mass-production and qualitative degeneration.

8
The rustic appeal of 'Madhubani painting' attracted the urban buyer. To the developers of 'handicrafts' the texture and colour of handmade or tarred brown paper appeared to represent 'authentic rusticity' most likely to captivate the ignorant buyer in search of his 'ethnic roots'.

9
The printer's line on the register reads: 'Raj Press, Darbhanga, 18.4.27.'

10
P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona, 1974), II, I, p. 532.

11
In Mithila the marriage, tonsure, and sacred thread ceremonies can be conducted only inside such temporary booths outside the house after consecrating the spaces. For a reference to a comparable custom in the *Dharmashastras* see note 10 above.

12
Kane, *op. cit.*

13
Another ritual known as *lahachhu* may be mentioned here. On the wedding day the bridegroom's family barber makes a small incision in the former's little finger with the *laharni* instrument, collects a drop of blood in cotton wool and carries it with him in the wedding procession. The same is done with the bride at her home. After the consecration ritual, but before the consummation ceremony, the piece of cotton wool with the drops of blood concealed in a piece of sweetmeat is fed to the oblivious groom and *vice versa*. This is to emphasise the intimacy between the two.

14
The sexual symbolism of curry-stone and mortar is widespread in India. Few examples may be quoted here. A Muria riddle for sexual congress reads: 'Mela and Jela swing to and fro outside; The iron rice-husker is at work within.' Verrier Elwin, *The Muria and their Ghotul* (London, 1947), p. 423.

15
Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

16
The Rathwas of central-eastern Gujarat and the Bhilalas of south-western Madhya Pradesh consecrate their wall paintings related to the myth of creation. See Jyotindra Jain, *The Painted Myths of Creation* (New Delhi, 1984). Similarly, the painted narrative scrolls of the folk deities Pabuji and Dev Narayan are consecrated before use. See Jyotindra Jain, 'The Implicit and the Manifest in Indian Folk Art and Mythology', in Nora Fisher (ed.), *Mud, Mirror and Thread* (Mapin Publishing, 1993). The *Shilpashastr*as, or the codified canonical texts of the art and architecture of the Hindus, provide elaborate descriptions of the consecration ceremonies of the temple and the images worshipped in them.

17
A tantric stanza regarding the eradication of an enemy reads: 'Thou of charming eyes (*kamakshi*), and of elusive appearance *(maya-rupin*) who charmest all immobilise immobilise, obstruct obstruct, delude delude...'.
T. Goudrian, *Maya Divine and Human* (Delhi, 1978), p. 113.

18
For *jog* songs in English translation, see Archer, W.G., *Songs for the Bride* (New York, 1985); one of these songs reads (p. 84): 'I charmed the bridegroom's crown/The charm went round and round/It mounted and sat on his head./The girls who cast the spell/was a rich man's daughter,/The girl who cast the spell/Was a darling.'

19
Kane, op. cit., p. 533.

20
The bride's brother sprinkling water on the groom with a mango branch at the latter's reception, the use of mango twigs for lighting the sacred fire to consecrate the *kohbar-ghar*, and the tying of mango leaves at the wedding booth, are other examples of the importance of the mango tree as a source of fertility.

21
A similar ritual of bathing the bridegroom on the same day takes place separately at the bridegroom's house.

22
Fast proliferating bamboo has tremendous ritual significance in Mithila. In the *kohbar-ghar*, the bridegroom is symbolically represented by a pictorial image of the plant.

23
An unmarried Maithil Kayasth girl is not allowed to cover her head with her own sari; her head may be so covered for the first time only after the solemnisation of her marriage when the bridegroom has ritually offered vermilion in the central parting of her hair.

24
Lava refers to roasted paddy.

25
It must be noted here that the clay used for constructing the oven for roasting the paddy is again ritually collected by female relatives of the bride and *hajamani*, or the barber's wife, on the *kumran* day from a nearby well.

26
For a reference in *Dharmashastra*, see Kane, op. cit., sp. 532. The act of taking the bride to the pond for the *kumran* bath at night must be seen in the context of the belief in Mithila that a pond, on account of its proliferating lotus plant and profusion of underwater life, is charged with abundance and fertility. One of the wrappers of vermilion sent by the groom to the bride depicts *kamaldah* or lotus pond.

27
Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 533.

28
Among most Hindu castes, *gotra* stands for family lineage including its offshoots. *Gotra* exogamy is observed to avoid incest.

29
Among the Kayasths of Mithila, five days before the actual day of the wedding, a ritual of putting aside some paddy for *lavachhidiyav* is conducted at the home of the bride. An *aripan* is specially drawn on the floor of the *angan* for this occasion. A *chamar* (leather worker and drummer) is invited to bring his drum and participate in the ritual. He is made to stand near the *aripan* holding his drum, which is slung around his neck, just above the *aripan*. Four women of the bride's family arrive there bearing paddy in brass-plates on their heads and accompanied by the bride. The bride takes away three fistfuls of paddy and keeps it aside. The rest of the paddy is poured by the women, one after the other, over the drum held above the *aripan* by the drummer, so that it scatters all over the *aripan* and around it. Throughout this ritual the bride is covered by a veil. The paddy thus scattered is collected by the drummer and taken home. The three fistfuls kept aside by the bride are roasted by her sister at the entrance to the *gosain-ghar* on *kumran* or the day before the actual wedding day, as described earlier.

The ritual of keeping aside paddy five days before the wedding and its roasting on the *kumran* day is conducted almost identically at both homes. When the grooms come to the bride's home on the day of the wedding, his relatives bring along the roasted paddy and hand it over to the bride's family. The paddy roasted at the bride's home is mixed with that brought by the groom.

30
Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 534.

31
Ibid.

32
Ibid., p. 533.

33
Ibid., p. 536.

34
Ibid.

35
The women also apply a *dahi ka tika* on the bride. Cf: 'Then the couple make a *tilaka* mark on each other's forehead...'. Kane, *ibid.*

36
In the case of a child-bride, the bride continues to stay with her parents till when she attains adulthood.

37
The husband hitting his bride with a mango branch at night, just before sexual union, must be seen in the broader context of mango leaves, twigs, and branches used for fertility purposes throughout the wedding ritual. It may also be pointed out that a woman enjoys a special relationship with her husband's younger brother which ranges from the protective to the emotional and the erotic.

38
For example, the worship of the goddess Shitala (goddess of smallpox) continues and the annual festival of Shitala *saptami* is observed even now, although smallpox has been eradicated.

39
Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

40
Ibid., pp. 202-203.

41
Ibid., p. 441.

42
Ibid., p. 203.

43
Ibid., p. 536.

44
W. G. Archer, 'Maithil Painting', in *Marg*, 3 (3), (Bombay, 1948), p. 26.

45
See Yves Vequaud, *Women Painters of Mithila* (London, 1977), p. 68: "...at the centre is painted a lingam, the phallic symbol, which pierces a *yoni*, symbol of female sexuality." Also see, Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum*, (New Delhi, n.d.), p. 136: 'As diagrams of generative organs, the open lotus is female, the bamboo male. The meeting of the two symbolises sexual encounter and union.'

46
See note 45 above.

47
Heinrich Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia* (New York, 1955), p. 160.

48
See note 45 above.

49
Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (New York, 1972), p. 293.

50
Ibid., p. 236.

51
Ibid., p. 237.

52
K. N. Dave, *Birds in Sanskrit Literature* (Delhi, 1985), p. 451.

53
Kane, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

54
Heinrich Zimmer, op. cit., p. 49: "...*nagakals*... are set up as votive tablets to snake-divinities by women desiring children".

55
In most parts of India, the entrance to a house is embellished with paintings because it is believed that this will attract deities, especially the goddess Lakshmi, to enter such a house and bring it good fortune .

56
Durgashtami is celebrated on the eighth day of the bright half of the Hindu month *ashvin* which occurs around October.

The Stories of Rama

1
In the collection of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi (Accession nos. 7/54/18, 7/5622).

2
One of the four aeons of Hindu cosmology.

3
This device, conveying to the viewer that one narrative situation is intended to be seen as distanced in time and space from the other, though juxtaposed at the same visual level, was commonly used in Sanskrit theatre where it was known as *apavarana* meaning 'in concealment'. The device, which was quite popular in the Ramlila theatre, may have led Ganga Devi to use it for pictorial purposes.

4
The Maithili note, in literal translation, reads: 'Sample of a novice's work. Mina's mother of Ranti village is my friend. You may obtain her opinion on my work. I do even better work than this and fill pigments properly. Mina's mother can provide all information about me. Poor artists like me should be helped'. The drawing is signed: 'Ganga Devi, Chatarawali.'

5
M. Schapiro, *Words and Pictures. On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague, 1973), p. 10.

6
Ibid., pp. 38-39.

The Cycle of Life

1
The vegetable slicer in Bihar, as well as in Bengal and Orissa, is also the fish slicer. The iron blade, often in the shape of a bird, is attached at a right angle to a wooden tablet which is held tight under the right foot when fish or vegetables are being chopped. The blessings of a girl, who has not yet attained puberty, are considered auspicious on this occasion.

2
W. G. Archer (ed.), *Love Songs of Vidyapati* (London, 1963), p. 81.

3
Ibid., p. 58.

4
Aegle marmelos.

Ride in a Roller Coaster

1
Under the auspices of the All India Handicrafts Board, now under the Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, a scheme for National Awards for 'excellence' in craftsmanship was instituted in 1965. Today the Awards are given under the categories of 'Master Craftsperson' and 'Master Weaver'. Apparently, all the artistic expressions of the rural and tribal communities of India – whether goldsmithy, miniature painting, or fashioning religious images are styled 'craft' under the scheme. Madhubani Painting was no exception to this, and as such Ganga Devi was declared 'Master Craftsperson' in 1976.

2
Though *pipal* and *ashoka* trees do not grow in the Himalayan region, Ganga Devi has chosen to depict them around the shrine of Badrinath, due to their sacred character.

3
The inscription in English translation, reads: 'To, saver of life, Jyotindra Jain sahib; began: September, 18.9.87, not for sale, Padmashri Ganga Devi; ended: May, 18.5.88, *malmas* (additional month) 3rd of the bright half (of the Hindu calendar).'

4
This remark of Ganga Devi reminds me of the ancient tradition of 'Pilgrimage Painting' that flourished at the temple of Jagannatha at Puri and that of the goddess Kali at Kalighat in Calcutta where sacred paintings were sold to pilgrims who brought them home for the ritual benefit of those who had not had the good fortune of going on a pilgrimage themselves. Similarly, there is a tradition among the Svetambara Jains of going on a pilgrimage to Mt. Shatrunjaya on *kartik purnima* (full moon of the Hindu month of *kartik*) around November. For the benefit of the old and disabled, however, who cannot undertake such a pilgrimage, there is a provision for the display of painted panels depicting Mt. Shatrunjaya in a Jain temple where the worshipper can venerate it on that day and obtain the same religious merit as those actually undertaking the pilgrimage.

Bibliography

Archer, W.G. "Maithil Painting", Bombay, *Marg Publications* no.3, 1948.

- ed. *Love Songs of Vidyapati*. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1963.

- *Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India*. Barbara Stoler Miller and Mildred Archer,eds. New York, Columbia University Press, 1985.

Archer, M. *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library*. New Delhi, Bombay etc., UBS Publishers, 1988.

Asher, C.B. and Metcalf T.R., eds. *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past*. New Delhi, American Institute of Indian Studies, Swadharma Swarajya Sangha and Oxford & IBH Publishing, 1994.

Baxandall, Michael. *Patterns of Intention. On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 4th ed. 1989.

Clifford, J. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 1988.

- "The Others: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm" *Third Text* no. 6. London, 1989.

Dalmia, Y. *The Painted World of the Warlis. Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*. New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1988.

Dave, K.N. *Birds in Sanskrit Literature*. Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1985.

Elwin, V. *The Muria and their Ghotul*. London, Oxford University Press, 1947.

Gombrich, E.H. *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985.

Goudriaan, T. *Maya Divine and Human*. Delhi, 1978.

Huyler, S.P., *Painted Prayers. Women's Art in Village India*. Ahmedabad, Mapin, 1996.

Jain, J. *The Painted Myths of Creation*. New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1984.

- and Swaminathan, J. eds. *The Art of the Adivasi (Indian Tribal Art)*. Tokyo/New Delhi, Festival of India in Japan, 1988.

- "Ganga Devi. Tradition et expresseion dans la peinture Madhubani". Les Cahiers, 28, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989.

- "The Implicit and the Manifest in Indian Folk Art and Mythology". *Mud, Mirror and Thread*; ed. Nora Fisher. Ahmedabad, Mapin, 1993.

"The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh legends of Mithila" in Goswany, B.N. *Indian Painting*, New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995.
- "Adivasi Art. Tribal and folk art: art versus craft versus commerce". *Art and Asia Pacific*, vol.2, no.1, Sydney, Jan. 1995.

Jayakar, P. *The Earthen Drum*. New Delhi, National Museum, n.d.

Kane, P.V. *History of Dharmasastra*. Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (8 vols.), 1968-1977.

Mishra, V. *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*. Allahabad, Mithila Prakashana, 1979.

Schapiro, M. *Words and Pictures. On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text*. The Hague, 1973.

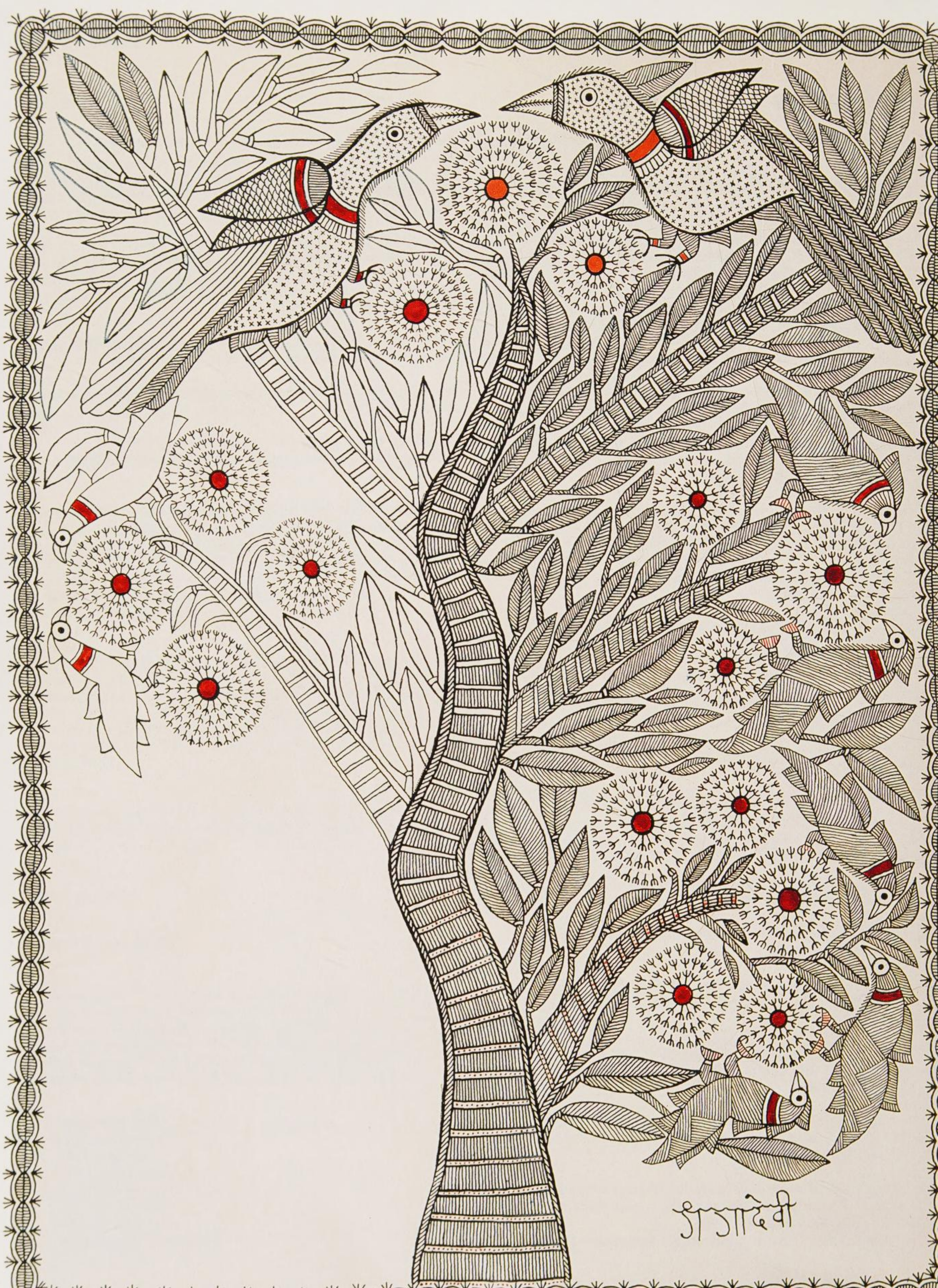
Swaminathan, J. *The Perceiving Fingers*. Bhopal, Bharat Bhavan, 1987.

Steinberg, L. *The Other Criteria. Confrontation with Twentieth-Century Art*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1972.

Vequaud, Y. *Women Painters of Mithila*. London, Thames and Hudson, 1977.

Zimmer, Heinrich. *The Art of Indian Asia*. New York, Bolingen Series, 1955.

Following page
The Japan Series;
The Clove Tree,
Ganga Devi, 1989,
pigment on board,
128 cm x 97 cm;
collection: Mithila
Museum, Niigata, Japan.



Jyotindra Jain, Director of the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum, popularly known as The Crafts Museum, New Delhi, is recognised as one of the most eminent historians of Indian tribal and folk arts. He obtained a Master's degree in Ancient Indian Culture from Bombay University, followed by a Ph.D. in Anthropology and Indology from the University of Vienna. He has since conducted extensive ethnographic field research in a number of states in India with a focus on the folk and tribal religions of Western India, and has set up the Shreyas Folk Museum of Gujarat. Dr. Jain has several publications on rituals and ritual arts of India to his credit, and exhibitions curated by him on various aspects of traditional Indian art have been shown in India and abroad. He has been a consultant and a visiting scholar to several mueums and institutions around the world. He is currently working on a book, *Kalighat Painting.*

Other titles of interest

The Flamed-Mosaic
Indian Contemporary Painting
Neville Tuli

Victoria & Albert Museum
Company Painting
Indian Paintings of the British Period
Mildred Archer

Pleasure Gardens of the Mind
Indian Paintings from the
Jane Greenough Green Collection
P. Pal, S. Markel and J. Leoshko

For a complete catalogue of books on
Indian art and culture, please write to:
Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.
Chidambaram, Usmanpura, Ahmedabad 380013 India

GANGA DEVI : TRADITIONS $35.00
0-944142-33-8 ART/PAINTING,PRINTS 03/97
Arthur M. Sackler Galleru

पदम श्री गंगादेवी
ग्राम=पोस्ट= रसीदपुर
भाषा= कबुआही
जिला= मधुबनी
बिहार = कोबरघर
ता०-१-१-८०

W7-DDL-433